

SMALL CENTRE AGENCIES REMOVING BARRIERS FOR LOW LITERACY NEWCOMERS

When COVID-19 made its way to Canada in March 2020, many were caught off guard with the sudden and profound changes that affected everyday life. The pandemic has impacted almost every facet of daily life—from the ways we communicate with each other, to how we access services, the ways in which we work, move between cities and provinces, or plan for the future. At the same time, it has also exposed vulnerabilities, highlighted strengths, and created new opportunities within existing systems.

One of the systems that had to adapt its way of doing things, literally overnight, was Alberta's settlement and integration sector. Almost every essential service that a newcomer must access in order to settle in a new country, such as learning a new language, finding adequate housing, healthcare, and employment, moved to virtual spaces, or had restricted in-person access. The quest to access these services became even harder for those who do not speak English and may have never used a computer.

Since the onset of the pandemic, AAISA had been hosting a series of meetings with the province's newcomer-serving agencies to determine the emergent challenges, needs, gaps and best practices in the settlement and integration sector. Across these meetings spaces, there was one particular group that staff consistently highlighted as being particularly vulnerable since the shift to virtual service delivery: low literacy newcomers.

In this story of impact, we wanted to shine a spotlight on some of the agencies in a few of Alberta's small centres that offer language programs for low literacy newcomers, and how they have risen to the challenge of the pandemic to continue to find innovative ways to support these clients. These agencies, like many others across the province and the country, have demonstrated flexibility, adaptation, quick thinking, and above all, empathy.

THE NEW NORMAL

In many cases, low literacy newcomers did not have the opportunity to go to school in their home countries. Once they move to Canada, many newcomers strive to acquire literacy in

English as an essential factor in their integration. Language classes are usually a place to go to acquire such skills.

Before the pandemic, newcomers had the opportunity to attend language classes in person, with an instructor in a traditional classroom setting. Enrolled clients would very often have an option to access onsite childcare available, or at least a subsidy. Class schedules would vary from part-time and full-time during the regular work week, or some schools would provide an option for a full day of instruction on Saturdays. While settlement providing agencies have many years of providing support to low literacy newcomers, the onset of the pandemic brought a new and sudden layer of complexity.

Language training is an integral component in supporting the meaningful settlement of integration of newcomers. However, as newcomers navigate many intersecting needs it can be particularly challenging to prioritize language training, especially for clients who start with low literacy where the learning curve is especially steep. As highlighted by Edson and District Community Learning Society's Executive Director, Ewen Murray, "We know that education and literacy are a crucial step in poverty alleviation, but many clients are focusing on survival needs rather than education. It is a vicious cycle for clients that is difficult to break". While these challenges are not new for low literacy newcomers, the pandemic added an entirely new level of complexity and uncertainty for both newcomers and the agencies that serve them.

Key challenges that were identified at Keyano College in Fort McMurray followed along the same pattern. Glenda Little-Kulai, Chair of the LINC Program at the College, said that the biggest obstacle for her clients was not having face-to-face support with instructional staff due to the online delivery of classes. Clients who enroll in language classes at Keyano College acquire a student ID which enables them access to online content. Before the pandemic, online access was rarely required as the lessons were held in a classroom setting and, when students required assistance, it would occur in person. However, since the pandemic has changed how things are done, everything has moved online, including individual assistance. As emphasized by Little-Kulai, this poses a significant challenge as "Most clients are not tech savvy, so they are facing difficulty finding their way through."

Asami McIntosh, Education Assistant at Lethbridge College, explained that at the beginning of the pandemic, many students struggled to find their usernames, passwords, and even the correct website URL. "One student was not able to login to their College account, so I asked them to take a picture of a computer screen with their phone and send it to me. I then created a tutorial of sorts by circling areas on the photo that were important in order for them to login successfully," McIntosh shared as an anecdote to highlight some of the challenges of online language classes.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE...

Ever since language instruction went online, clients and instructors have worked tirelessly to find the best possible way to ensure a smooth transition to this virtual space. All ideas were welcomed, and no solution was off limits— whether it was using personal cellphones and tablets, to sharing computers and laptops with other family members or friends, or even direct phone calls and step-by-step instructions. Every available piece of technology would come in handy, and every available avenue of support would mean the world to the client. This is where volunteers stepped in.

“Our unpaid volunteers were tutoring those who needed more hours to develop their language skills,” praised Darrel Wiens, the Executive Director of Grande Prairie Council for Lifelong Learning.

They say that it takes a village to make any change happen, and in Fort McMurray the whole community joined forces to support their new neighbours. Keyano College collaborated with the Local Immigration Partnership Coordinator, YMCA Settlement Services, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Community Services, and the Multicultural Association of Wood Buffalo to form an ad hoc “translation team” to ensure vital and important messaging put out by the municipality and Alberta Health Services was disseminated to the newcomer community, especially after a natural disaster struck the community amidst the pandemic. “We reviewed, simplified, and translated messaging such as evacuation notices for certain areas, shelter information, transportation options, boil water advisories, and where to go for assistance, etc. onto social media platforms and shared with students to ensure that they received the information”, explained Little-Kulai.

In Edson, both instructors and volunteers stepped up to help each individual succeed. “We have tutoring time set aside to help individuals discover learning tools, and laptops available to use while in the centre,” said Murray. He also shared his astonishment with the staff skillsets that help deal effectively with cross-cultural and low literacy communication. “The instructors had previously learned about the clients’ cultural background, practiced active listening, smiled and maintained a personal touch. They encouraged and balanced participation of the group and made conversation circles and English Language Learning classes more effective.”

Murray went further to praise their English Language Learning (ELL) classes that are “always flexible and responsive to the needs of learners, especially within a multi-level environment.” Recently, he observed one of the lessons and was amazed with multiple authentic learning opportunities. “The lesson planning focuses on what our instructor knew were obstacles clients faced daily in their day-to-day lives. Our instructor told me that this enables their lesson

planning to build upon the client's strengths. It is this anecdotal and formative assessment that makes our programs so successful.”

The instructional team at Lethbridge College used blogs, Canvas, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Facebook, and other platforms to stay in touch with students and deliver the lessons. “We would offer individual meetings on Friday, from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm, and those are still in place for the students who struggle with online access and remote learning,” explained Jody Alston, PBLA Lead Instructor. As the Education Assistant, McIntosh added that she would make herself available for the students after school hours, as they faced a lot of problems with video, audio, and Internet access.

BROADER NETWORK OF SUPPORT

Innovation thrives in crisis, and stories from Lethbridge and Fort McMurray speak to that. Little-Kulai’s team at Keyano College created an online literacy repository for instructors over the summer. “The repository includes resources for supporting instructors (e.g., how to teach literacy students, useful websites, etc.) but also resources that can be used in classes for supporting literacy students in their language learning which includes activities and materials.” She went further to praise their new “How To” videos that provide step-by-step instructions with visual support for students which are being used as part of their orientation for new students.

Add a link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn5mkdQ3t84&feature=youtu.be>

Lethbridge College ensured that every student has access to technology required for online learning. For that purpose, they applied for and received funding from United Way to purchase additional laptops to meet the students’ needs. Simultaneously, the College created a laptop lending policy to ensure the sustainability of the lending program. Students are still able to go to the College for a curbside pick up of laptops and textbooks, even though the classes are running online. They also offered a basic Digital Literacy class from September to December 2020, which unfortunately had to be cancelled due funding, but produced a lot of success. Moreover, just like the team at Keyano College, the team at Lethbridge College also created “How To” videos for the students to enable continuous learning.

Building connection to the community is integral for all newcomers, and low literacy learners are no exception. To facilitate connections to the community, the team at Fort McMurray regularly invites community organizations and agencies to present to online language classes as guest speakers. Some of the guest speakers they had so far include YMCA Settlement Services, Women Building Futures, Bank of Canada, Servus Credit Union, Primary Care Network, Safe

Communities Wood Buffalo, Canada Revenue Agency, and instructors from other departments at Keyano. Another facet of Keyano's engagement of partners involves local employers.

Since 2018, the College has successfully hosted an annual Employer Information Session with LINC classes, with the exception of last year, due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The event provides an educational experience for students with language barriers. "It involves inviting the hiring managers of a variety of companies in the community to come into the Zoom classroom and describe to newcomers what it takes to succeed in entry-level positions in their companies. They also describe the skills they are looking for as well as some of the specific reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks that are involved on the job." While the format of the event has had to change, it continues to be an important and valuable connection for low literacy clients and local employers alike.

ONLINE LEARNING CREATED OPPORTUNITIES

While online learning once seemed almost a mission impossible, it has now become a model that has yielded many successes, best practices, and opportunities for the future. Mark McIntosh, LINC Coordinator at Lethbridge College, said that students have adapted well to online learning, and that they are overall more focused. "They can get individualized support and have no distractions like in the traditional classroom. They can message the instructor individually, instead of interrupting the class. The ability to share screen helps a lot as the instructors can highlight important parts in text which allows students to better focus and learn faster."

Little-Kulai's team at Keyano College offered in-person classes for low level and low literacy classes (CLB 1, CLB 1L and CLB 2L classes) with a once weekly computer lab in the fall until end of November last year. "Due to rise in COVID cases and provincial restrictions at this time, we moved back to online. However, instructors and instructor aides practiced with students on their own devices to promote student success with online learning," explained Little-Kulai.

The efforts to assist each student at Keyano College became even harder when a sudden flood engulfed the streets of Fort McMurray in April 2020. Even that did not stop community to continue with their quest and take care of the most vulnerable ones. "During the massive flood in April, our staff attempted to contact every single student by phone to ensure their safety." For those that we were not able to contact, they were reported to RMCP and the RCMP were able to account for all of them within 48 hours.

All four agencies went above and beyond to help their clients, by creating hands on learning materials and delivering them to students to help overcome digital barriers. They helped with

mobile apps, finding the most appropriate software to maintain regular communication, and instructor aides provided one-on-one time to troubleshoot and guide the students through the process.

LONG-TERM IMPACT

Although these agencies had to change their way of doing things overnight and faced many hurdles along the way, their impact is far reaching. All the hard work did not just affect the lives of individuals enrolled in their programs, but everyone in their communities.

One of the examples is a local school in Edson where Family School Liaisons and Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) directly see the success stories that arise from supporting low literacy newcomers. Murray shared that SWIS workers in Edson “Note that the adult learners assign more value to education and reading within the family, and this leads to intergenerational transmission of literacy rather than illiteracy”. Many adults participating in programming designed to assist low literacy learners are fearful of community involvement and civic participation. “With increased skill sets, we see our clients receive the benefits of becoming more active in our community. Increased involvement improves health, social connectedness, employability, and productivity,” Murray continued.

Similarly, Murray’s colleagues in Grande Prairie would agree as they also witness the broad impact of supporting low literacy learners. Programs at Grande Prairie Council for Lifelong Learning help strengthen diversity and inclusion in the community by enabling newcomers to gain settlement skills and opportunities, especially relating to life in northern Alberta. “Our agency provides a space for newcomers to connect with local non-newcomer groups, and employers through our employment-assisted programs. It also helps raise awareness of available programs and services for newcomers. We also advocate for their needs through our engagement with local opinion leaders, and involvement in groups, such as the Local Immigration Partnership,” said Wiens.

This same sentiment was shared in Fort McMurray. As Little-Kulai shared, newcomers enrolled at Keyano College learn about the community and resources available and are able to use the resources within the community for themselves and their families. “Students are exposed to employment opportunities and are therefore making a meaningful contribution to the community,” she highlighted. Through language classes at Keyano College, newcomers in Fort McMurray are also getting more comfortable with technology and are able to better navigate available resources, both of which help to encourage independence and success in the community. Not only do newcomers have an opportunity to improve their language skills, Little-



Kulai also adds that “The College provides a social network for students that do not have one,” something that an essential element in meaningful settlement and integration.

Their southern colleagues in Lethbridge share the sentiment and emphasize that the biggest change they noticed was an increase in women participation, especially mothers. As Education Assistant Asami McIntosh concluded, the most important thing is to believe in the students and that they are able to achieve their learning goals. “We are here to ensure that they make the desired change in their lives, and I believe that a lot of things that we do now will transfer into their everyday lives.”

While the four agencies agreed that this period has been uniquely challenging, there is no doubt that their commitment to serving low literacy clients is adamant. Regardless of the difficulties of this unprecedented time, each agency found ways to rise the challenge and ensure that low literacy clients receive the support they need to flourish. Ultimately, when newcomers thrive, we all do.