

CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE COVID-19 LENS:

HARNESSING INNOVATION AND MOBILIZING BEST PRACTICES FROM THE PANDEMIC

FOCUS AREA: LANGUAGE

IN BRIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique challenges for settlement and integration agencies as they seek to deliver language learning services to the newcomers they serve. The transition to virtual programming has increased the capacity for instructors to teach remotely and to offer some classes on a flexible schedule to better meet the diverse needs of students. The newcomer-serving sector has also developed innovative strategies to increase digital literacy as well as technological access (e.g., access to internet services, access to appropriate devices designed for virtual learning such as laptops). This pivot in services has also necessitated many swift adaptations and innovations by settlement and integration agencies which have engendered new best practices and opportunities for shared capacity building.

The Capacity Building Through the COVID-19 Lens Project seeks to capture and mobilize these best practices through key focus areas. This brief seeks to summarize the key findings of this first language focus group hosted in September 2021, as well as highlight points of further inquiry that will direct the discussion of the second focus group scheduled to commence in January 2022.

Please note that underlined terms throughout the brief can be found in the **Glossary**.

KEY FINDINGS

BEST PRACTICES

LOW LITERACY AND LOW DIGITAL LITERACY

The best practices utilized to combat barriers associated with **low literacy and low digital literacy** include:

- One-on-One supports (provided virtually and in-person).
- Use of **hardcopy handouts** as a mechanism to increase digital literacy (e.g., printing step by step guides).
- Providing **digital literacy courses** and **pre-recorded training videos** that can be used as an orientation device or as workshops for newcomer clients as well as language instructors.
- Utilization of **social media platforms** such as WhatsApp and Facebook for language program delivery, conduct conversation circles, and relay course updates. Newcomer clients are more likely to have access to individual mobile devices to access social media platforms.
- Providing **in-person exceptions** for students with highest needs while implementing public health restrictions.

TECHNOLOGICAL ACCESS

The best practices utilized to combat barriers associated with **low technological access** include:

- Increasing technological access through the creation of **laptop lending programs** or utilization of **existing computer labs** within college campuses.
- Providing **subsidized or free internet services**, through partnerships and diverse funding sources. Services provided ranged from getting in touch with internet service providers to install internet access, reimbursing newcomer clients for paid internet services, and connecting newcomers to qualifying reduced internet services pricing.
- Having a **digital navigator role** (this could be an educational assistant or IT staff) to provide technological support to newcomers both virtually and in-person.

APPROPRIATE WORKSPACES

The best practices identified to assist both instructors and students to overcome **access to appropriate workspaces** include:

- Agencies have created **care packages** that were mailed or delivered to newcomer homes. These care packages included activities for children of newcomers participating in language learning courses to engage with while their parents were in class. Examples of what was provided in the care packages included colouring books, snacks, writing materials and small toys.

- Agencies have also taken the initiative to print out **work kits** for newcomer clients. These work kits aid to bridge the challenges associated with low digital literacy and low technological access and give newcomers the opportunity to return to language learning using **hardcopy assignments and lessons**. These work kits also gave newcomers the opportunity to take a break from screen time.
- **Asynchronous** portions of language **service delivery**, **hybrid courses**, and **flexible testing times** have been implemented to better meet the differing needs of newcomers.
- **Virtual childcare** has been piloted for newcomers attending language learning courses. Virtual childcare can be implemented in a variety of methods depending on the child's age. Older children can participate through joining a group session over Zoom or WhatsApp. Despite the hesitancy to give children increased screen time, virtual childcare has provided children of newcomers the opportunity to practice English language learning.

HYBRID AND FLEXIBLE LANGUAGE COURSES

The best practices identified in relation to the delivery of **hybrid courses** include:

- Utilizing a flipped class approach to ensure that the synchronous portions of language learning are focused on maximizing the instructor's capacity to provide one-on-one supports.

NEXT STEPS

For the next language service delivery focus group scheduled for January 2022, AAISA seeks to further refine the findings from the first focus group session and discuss the desired implementation of past learnings into **organizational capacity building and professional development resources** for the sector.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK REFLECTING THE TRANSITION OF IN PERSON TO VIRTUAL PROGRAM DELIVERY

Both newcomer clients and language learning instructors have shared positive feedback from adapting to the world of virtual programming. Both students and instructors have indicated that their **digital literacy has increased**, that virtual program delivery has resulted in a **reduction in barriers to participating in language learning** (e.g., finding affordable and accessible childcare, transportation costs, and geographic constraints) and have indicated a strong push for continuing with **flexibility in program delivery** (e.g., offering hybrid courses, flexible testing times, and providing asynchronous independent course work).

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

Low digital literacy and low literacy

- Discussion on what digital literacy courses entail, how they are conducted and the tools necessary to create success for instructors and newcomers alike
- Discussion on how to provide further digital literacy trainings prior to formal language learning
- Discussion on how literacy courses can better meet the unique needs of vulnerable clients, especially in a virtual environment

Appropriate workspaces

- Discussion on how virtual childcare is conducted as well as resources necessary for creating success for newcomers accessing virtual language programming

Hybrid courses

- Discussion on how innovative, flexible language courses (e.g., hybrid courses, increased flexibility in testing and assignment completion, asynchronous course delivery, blended in-person and virtual course delivery) are implemented and what changes to the classroom need to be done to provide this service
- Identification of which aspects of language learning are vital to remain in person and which can be conducted online

GLOSSARY

Digital literacy: Having the ability to define, access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competencies that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy and media literacy. It entails the ability to identify and use technology confidently, creatively, and critically to meet the demands and challenges of living, learning and working in a digital society. It extends beyond simple digital consumption behaviour and into digital fluency.

Flipped class approach: The flipped class approach is a blended learning model that introduces learning content to students to work through at home, and allows for practice, problem solving and working through the content together during class time.

Hybrid courses: Hybrid courses refers to the practice of engaging a mix of both in-person course delivery as well as the use of virtual programming. It is a thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online environments to conduct teaching and learning. It is often used interchangeable with terms such as blended learning, mixed-mode or flexible learning. It is usually based on specific needs,



capacities, modalities and pedagogies of a particular institution or sector. This term is synonymously with the term blended learning.

Technological access: Access to the physical capacities to technology. A lack of technological access can include the infrastructure needed for internet access (particularly prevalent in rural areas or small centres), lack of access to internet due to financial limitations, insufficient devices to participate in virtual programming (e.g., sharing laptops within a household with children needing to participate in virtual schooling and parents needing the device for virtual programming, relying on cellphones rather than a laptop/Chromebook/tablet).

Virtual programming: Virtual programming is a form of distanced learning that is conducted completely over the Internet. It refers to newcomer and direct service agencies participating in courses virtually, through the internet and without the need of attending in-person courses. It can be performed both asynchronously or synchronously, depending on the instructor and/or course. This term can be used synonymously with remote learning.