

Summary report from Calgary Learns’ Pivot to Remote Learning Community of Practice

Written by Monica Leong, Online Moderator of the Community of Practice

In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic abruptly forced the adult foundational learning community to make major changes. Health restrictions prohibited face-to-face learning, so programs had to respond quickly and shift how they engaged with learners and delivered programming.

In direct response to this upheaval, Calgary Learns brought together a small group of adult foundational learning practitioners in a new initiative project called the Pivot to Remote Learning Community of Practice. This dedicated group met regularly online for a year to share and reflect on the new knowledge and emerging wise practices that support successful remote delivery of adult foundational learning programs.

The Community of Practice used an *emergent* and *reflective* process to explore how members were adjusting their practices and their thinking to meet the changing needs of learners, practitioners, and programs.

The Community of Practice included a core group of 8 adult literacy and foundational learning practitioners, facilitators and program coordinators from a variety of agencies and service providers in the Calgary area. We met exclusively through online video conferences using Zoom. We used multiple methods to encourage members to share their ideas, including large group discussion, small group discussion and reporting back to the large group, real time demonstrations and descriptions of practices, as well as written forms of reflection and sharing.

In our conversations, we remained flexible to address the evolving priorities and understanding of the members. It was not a simple, linear approach to asking questions and finding answers, but rather an evolving conversation in a supportive community that allowed for deeper reflection and risk taking.

This summary report highlights the:

- * **Evolving Conversation** in the Community of Practice
- * **Key Learnings** that surfaced in the project
- * **Next Steps** to support learner access to quality programs in remote, online, and blended learning environments.

The Evolving Conversation

The monthly meetings of the Pivot to Remote Learning Community of Practice were a place for members to reflect on their experiences, share their insights, and engage in discussions with their colleagues. The emergent conversation allowed valuable insights to surface, pointed to a path forward, and revealed some unexpected results.

Below, we trace the conversation through three main stages: (1) Surviving, (2) Adapting, and (3) Moving Forward. We have highlighted direct quotes from Community of Practice members in italics.

Surviving: Dealing with shock and urgency

At the beginning of our year-long journey, members talked of the initial shock of the transition to remote learning and the resulting urgency to adapt.

“all of us were running on adrenaline...wondering whether we would go online, if literacy should ever even go online, and could it?”

In addition to navigating the pandemic in their personal lives, practitioners were also in a survival phase in their professional lives, trying to figure out what to do, how to stay in contact with learners, and how to get started with facilitating learning in virtual learning environments.

“I think at the beginning we were not just in our physical survival mode but.. every class...it was just planning, planning what you needed... and not really having the mental space to be really thoughtful about what you're doing and the direction you wanted to head and how things were working.”

The pace of change was astounding and labour intensive, and practitioners described how they were “just trying to keep up”. Programs needed new processes for tracking information and connecting with learners, so they had to develop them in real time as the programs were running.

"I feel like we're winging it and we've got it and it's going fine, but it's all by the fingernails, by the skin of my teeth. That's how it feels.

Virtually overnight, practitioners found themselves grappling to deal with a shift out of the classroom and into a virtual or remote or distanced learning environment.

“Some of us were thinking this is terrible! Remote learning is never going work for our learners, we can't possibly do this.”

Also in the early stages of the Community of Practice, some members shared their concerns about how to collect, synthesize and report to funders. These concerns were presenting program coordinators with difficult challenges. Regarding meeting program targets, one member said,

“ we haven't even had time to think about how to evaluate the program yet...”

The members discussed the importance of maintaining strong communication with funders, particularly around any concerns of not being able to meet the targets that programs had proposed before the pandemic began.

Adapting: Making things work in the new environment

Over time, as our group continued to meet, a shift started to happen in the conversation. Practitioners shared that, just as they were adjusting to the layers of change in their lives, they were also finding ways of teaching and adapting to what learners needed in this new environment.

The shift away from face-to-face learning environments meant that practitioners needed to be flexible and creative to connect with learners. In describing the efforts needed to reach learners, one Community of Practice member summed it up this way:

“(We) sent parcels to people's homes or did hand deliveries to people's homes, did phone lessons, and Zoom lessons, and Skype lessons, and Teams lessons, and Google classrooms, and every combination you could think of.”

Our conversations became more about concepts of learner engagement and how to navigate the new privacy concerns and issues that come with online meetings when learners, and practitioners, are joining class from their own homes. And we spoke about the different demands that remote/online/blended learning puts on both learners and practitioners. Members also discussed concepts of evaluation and assessment, focusing on the importance of using a learner-centred approach, having a clear purpose, and embracing collaborative assessment.

But while our conversation was evolving and reflecting ideas such as the importance of learner engagement and approaches to evaluation and assessment in virtual learning environments, something rather unexpected was happening. The group discussions were more about supporting each other and engaging with ideas and shifts in thinking, rather than eliciting a set of instructions or specific strategies on how to shift to remote learning.

“this has been a very interesting learning journey for me, and I must say very unexpected, like to be very honest I expected this group to be focused on the content. So...my plan was to learn in this group, “What do I do, and...how do I train my staff, in terms of what do we do?”...I was planning to share the content of the meetings...at our team meetings, and instead we spent the time building relationships, and I am intrigued with this process. It confirmed what I always say and how I think about learning, that you have to start with relationships. Like you cannot jump to the content right away. I really appreciated these meetings and the opportunity to see other people grappling with the same challenges that I was, that were part of my reality.”

Moving Forward: Learning in the new normal

As our year together neared its end, we saw a new level of confidence and positivity around the opportunities that remote/online/blended program delivery offers – not just in the new ways of connecting with learners and going about learning and facilitating in virtual environments, but in the ways that this shift has focused practitioners on the essential elements of their professional practice.

“I feel like we're calmer and maybe more confident about...what it looks like when we're teaching remotely and we probably all feel like our learners are gaining something from the programs that they're in.”

Members described how important it was for them to be able to journey together with other colleagues in a safe, supportive environment where they could discuss their concerns, rethink their practices, try out new ideas, and hear about others' experiences.

"Our meetings here were not always so much about content, but about support and a space to reflect and to become more confident and to think about what you're doing. So that's great...that reassuring sense that you got from our community."

"The most rewarding part of this year-long journey has been for me meeting regularly and consistently with the same group of literacy practitioners over this tumultuous period. For all the time I spent trying to provide support for my learners, it was reassuring and positive to know that I could rely on my own community of support from this network of intelligent and thoughtful practitioners...This community of practice was a needed support during this period of pivot."

"...how do I measure this change that occurred in me?...it was the community and not exactly what we were learning but how we were learning and sharing and being with each other...that was for me the most impactful and meaningful"

"We were given license and permission to explore, to be creative, to make mistakes and then collectively remedy them...it was a very safe environment...this provided me with tremendous value in discovering strategies to teach and inspire students in the digital venue. It impacted me in a personal and powerful way and compelled me to be more intentional in reaching students to build connection, community, and relationship."

Members also described a shift in their thinking about how digital literacy and digital skills are no longer optional in adult foundational learning. They understand now that all the hiccups and strategies and workarounds that they were using to help learners connect online and develop their digital skills, these are not things that are getting *in the way* of foundational learning. They *are* foundational learning itself.

"...(a) remote (learning) framework wasn't in (my) head at the beginning of this process...So that's sort of...grown, and it's interesting because it may have even been that...because it had always been face to face...we didn't even realize that we had that framework, until we had to get...shot out of it and realize, oh there's a new way of doing things or a different way of doing things. And so...this community of practice has been helpful in terms of starting to build that new mental model."

Key Learnings

The Pivot to Remote Learning Community of Practice highlighted practitioners' lived experience and reflections which, together, offer insights from the field including wise practices and innovations that support the success of remote program delivery. Practitioners developed an understanding of the new learning landscape and the impact of the pivot to remote learning. Providing valuable programs through remote/online/blended learning environments does not simply mean transferring face-to-face programming to online platforms. It requires a thorough rethinking of how we address the core elements of foundational learning, including developing relationships with learners, facilitating engagement, understanding learners' goals, building learner confidence, recognizing growth, and responding to learners' needs and strengths.

The following areas represent the key learnings from this project:

Focus on learning, not on technology

One of the biggest takeaways from the project is that practitioners must not be distracted by - or expect themselves to know everything about - all the digital tools and the technology available for remote/online/blended learning. No matter what the location of the learning environment, the platform in use, or the tools that learners are using, the technology is not the focus. It is the tool for connection. The learning is the focus.

Digital literacy and skill development are not optional in foundational learning

More than ever, the digital skills needed to get things done and communicate are essential skills for everyone. They are foundational learning skills. So, while the technology does not drive the learning, it presents many new opportunities and contexts for learning. All of the challenges and hiccups we encounter as we onboard learners or try new things online, and all the skills needed to get past those challenges, are not detracting from foundational learning – they ARE foundational learning.

Build relationships and encourage learner engagement

Learners need to feel a connection to the program and staff in order to be ready to learn. Building those connections is more challenging through remote delivery. Practitioners need additional time now to connect with learners and have conversations to assess how things are working for them and what they need. Encouraging engagement means offering support and finding ways for everyone to bring more of themselves into the learning environment. This can be challenging in virtual settings where it is not as easy to read the energy in the room or learners' body language. Checking in more frequently with individual learners in whatever way works for them is one way to better understand learners in virtual settings. Engagement levels may be lower due to not only the digital divide but also to distractions, pressures, and risks that are now present in the learners' environments at home that were not present in classrooms.

Promote a positive mindset for learners and practitioners

Over the past year, the practitioners in our community have developed increased confidence in adapting programming to meet learning needs, and they have a positive mindset about teaching and learning in virtual

environments. At the beginning, some practitioners expressed concerns and focused on barriers, but the supportive community of practice conversations helped them move through the anxiety of pivoting, develop confidence and trust, and be more willing to make mistakes. They report feeling more capable of facilitating learning well.

Part of the positive mindset also includes communicating to learners that they *can* learn online and can have higher expectations of themselves. Members have seen learners grow in ways that they may not have expected, for example, using multiple windows from the task bar or remembering their own passwords that they used to need the practitioner to help them remember.

Remote/online/blended learning is demanding

- **Providing valuable programs** through remote/online/blended learning environments does not simply mean transferring face-to-face programming to online platforms. It requires a thorough rethinking of how we address the core elements of foundational learning, including developing relationships with learners, facilitating engagement, understanding learners' goals, building learner confidence, recognizing growth, and responding to learners' needs and strengths.
- **Cognitive overload** is a risk to learners due to the task-switching or multitasking required to learn content while also learning digital literacy skills at the same time. This overload can affect learners' memory and their ability to learn.
- **Increased stress** on learners is affecting learning and may result in changes to individuals' needs.
- **Pace of change:** Many practitioners feel the quick pace of change, for both themselves and their learners, means they are just trying to keep up to day-to-day needs. They can feel they do not have the mental "bandwidth" to do everything they usually do in their program.
- **Increased demands on practitioners** are a result of the shift to remote learning which is more labour intensive and requires more administrative work. Adjusting to new, changing processes is challenging.
- **High-stakes learning** presents additional challenges for learners. Many services and supports in all areas of life are now accessible exclusively online, so this creates new sense of urgency for learners to learn how to use technology to meet their needs.
- **"Lost learners"** are a whole demographic of learners that are not present in this semester of programming because they aren't able to access the classes. These learners, who either left during the shift to remote programming or who did not sign up to start an online program in the fall, are often the ones who need the most help. The learners who persisted in virtual programs might, therefore, represent a demographic of more capable, motivated learners who do not have the same level of need. Therefore, programs need to be aware that their evaluation data may show greater gains than anticipated because the learners who remained or have joined are the more proficient learners to begin with.
- **Programs require flexibility** to adapt to changing circumstances. Some programs have more flexibility than others. Less flexibility makes it challenging to meet targets and fulfil program requirements during times of upheaval.
- **New processes** for collecting information are being developed and used in real time; programs need to articulate and streamline these processes.

Finding and connecting with learners requires flexibility and creativity

The shift away from face-to-face learning environments meant that practitioners needed to be flexible and creative to connect with learners. They reached out to learners using the tools that were available to both the learners and the programs. Many learners had no reliable internet connection and very few digital skills and experience, so practitioners used many different methods to connect with their learners, including everything from online platforms and virtual meetings, to mobile phones and instant messaging apps, to hand-delivering paper packages to learners' homes. Practitioners spent time and effort providing individualized support to learners to identify which method worked best for them.

Creating safe learning spaces is complex in remote learning

Learners' needs are changing due to stress, accessibility, increased pressures, in/ability to attend due to childcare or other factors.

Privacy concerns present important considerations. To give learners choice and respect their privacy, we need to check our assumptions and understanding of many parts of remote learning. This includes the issue of whether learners choose to turn their cameras on or off, what they choose to show to everyone, what may be shown accidentally, and the impacts of mixing the public arena of the learning space with the private arena of people's homes. It is important to find ways to help learners still have a presence in the learning environment even if they need to keep their cameras off. Practitioners also need to feel that their privacy is respected so strategies around using virtual backgrounds and virtual phone numbers, so facilitators do not share their private phone numbers either in calls or text messages.

Offering choice is a key element of successful program delivery in any learning environment, including remote learning. Facilitators must think through which options they encourage learners to use when responding in class. How practitioners think about privacy and engagement impacts the choices they permit in their virtual learning spaces.

Professional development for practitioners is extremely valuable

Members shared how much they valued the chance to journey together with other colleagues in a safe, supportive community of practice where they could discuss their concerns, rethink their practices, try out new ideas, and hear about others' experiences. Members also shared that it is not only learners who need to develop digital literacy and digital skills. The sudden shift to remote delivery meant that practitioners needed to pivot instantly to using digital skills and platforms as their tools to connect with learners and deliver programming. This change caused many practitioners to face a steep learning curve of digital skills for themselves at the same time as they were needing to assist their learners. Going forward, practitioners will continue to need access to ongoing professional development and technology support.

Next Steps

After a year of piloting the Pivot to Remote Learning project, and listening to members' reflections and experiences, it is clear that there is more to learn from practitioners and programs. The conversation followed unexpected pathways and demonstrated that practitioners valued the supportive environment of the community of practice during the stormy times of the pandemic. But it also showed that practitioners have developed myriad strategies that take advantage of the opportunities offered by remote/online/blended learning. They have helped their learners access programming, and seen what barriers are hindering that access. And they have seen that together, in a community of practice, they can support each other to try new strategies and develop their own confidence and that of their learners.

Now is the time to build on the success of the Pivot to Remote Learning project. Calgary Learns is ready and well-positioned to take the next logical step to support learners and practitioners. The Digital Divide Project has emerged as that next step.

The Digital Divide Project will gather direct experiences from practitioners in the field to highlight the impact and extent of the Digital Divide on adult foundational learners in the Community Adult Learning Program (CALP) system. It will include identifying the gaps and challenges learners experience and will offer recommendations for the kinds of supports needed to address the barriers they face in accessing remote/online/blended learning. The project will also scale out across the province to capture and share the best delivery practices for remote/online/blended learning that adult foundational learning practitioners have developed.

Over the past year, the Pivot to Remote Learning project nurtured an evolving conversation in a supportive environment for members. Their thoughtful reflections and generous sharing allowed key learnings to surface, and from those learnings, important next steps have emerged. Regardless of when face-to-face learning opportunities return to the adult foundational learning field in Alberta, the learning landscape has shifted irrevocably. Together, the Pivot to Remote Learning Project and the Digital Divide Project will inform and support practitioners and programs as they continue to offer remote/online/blended learning opportunities now and in the future.

End Note

My own personal experience as moderator of this online community of practice represents some of the challenge and opportunity that comes from a shift to remote/online/blended learning.

I was new to facilitating a Community of Practice and I expected its trajectory to be different. Somewhat naively, I envisioned our team spending some time getting to know each other, occasionally meeting in-person as restrictions eased, and identifying a database worth of strategies to answer all of the challenges they faced from the shift to remote learning.

Thankfully, this project reminded me of the nature of learning and community. They emerge over time, given the right conditions of responsive nurturing and engaged members. They do not always follow a predictable pathway

or schedule, and they can feel wobbly and unsettled at times. To embrace that emergent nature, I needed to allow for unexpected twists and turns and “read the virtual room” to understand where the conversation needed to go. I learned to use only the technology tools we needed to support the conversation, avoiding layers of unnecessary complexity. I removed the shiny bells and whistles that distracted us from our purpose. And I stored away, for another time in the near future, my database of challenges and the specific strategies to address those challenges.

It took many deep breaths to follow that emergent, unpredictable path, but it was worth the effort to create a responsive, supportive environment that the community members valued. It was a steep learning curve for all of us, and I am grateful for the opportunity to journey along in my growth with a patient and understanding team.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Calgary Learns for their leadership and vision in offering this initiative project for the benefit of learners and practitioners across the province.

Thank you to the members of our Community of Practice, who shared their time, insights, and reflections. I am extremely grateful for their generosity and courage, and I am honoured to have walked alongside them in this project. Throughout a year of pandemic challenges, they demonstrated their professionalism and commitment to our community of practice and to the concept of an emergent, reflective project. In doing so, they co-created a safe space for professional growth and risk-taking, and they broke new ground in the adult foundational learning field.