

Evaluation of AlphaRoute 2002-2003

Report on a Survey of AlphaRoute use in Literacy and
Basic Skills Delivery Agencies

Centre AlphaPlus Centre
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Introduction

AlphaRoute is a web-based application for interactive literacy learning that is managed by AlphaPlus Centre. AlphaRoute was designed for use by literacy learners and literacy practitioners, with a primary focus on the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program in Ontario. For the initial five years of the AlphaRoute project, various LBS agencies participated in the content development and field research of AlphaRoute. In 2002-3, phase 6, AlphaRoute was ready for LBS agency use in program delivery.

Although AlphaRoute was originally designed and piloted as a distance literacy tool, with features such as a mentor desk with photo of the mentor and activities that involve faxing results to mentors who are presumably working at a distance, AlphaRoute was implemented as an onsite tool in Ontario LBS agencies in 2002-3.

As an onsite tool, AlphaRoute is part of the larger literacy delivery services an LBS agency offers, such as comprehensive assessment services and literacy training using various print-based materials and possibly other media, such as software. This means that the practitioners working with AlphaRoute are onsite and play a live support role in AlphaRoute.

For most LBS delivery agencies, this was the first time they had used an online learning environment in their literacy work. It was also the first time that practitioners had participated in virtual training on how to use such an environment and for many, the first time they had used Centra Symposium. AlphaPlus had collected evaluations on the practitioner training but wanted to find out how programs were doing months after training after they had actually started using AlphaRoute.

In a current study being carried out by AlphaPlus Centre on learner perception of the effectiveness of online learning, learners overwhelmingly report finding value in working with AlphaRoute and being excited by online learning. During the same period, however, program practitioners reported different experiences with AlphaRoute, expressing frustration to AlphaPlus at trying to find the time to adequately learn how to use the tool and integrate it into their regular literacy teaching. Other current issues include technical difficulties, concerns with the quality of learning content offered on AlphaRoute, and lack of usefulness of some of the AlphaRoute program set-up and tracking tools (training plan and portfolio).

Currently, AlphaRoute is being piloted in British Columbia and Newfoundland. These pilots have met with strong success. This is possibly due to the fact that a high level of support was provided to practitioners and learners who are taking part in these pilots, including face-to-face training and full-time coordination and learner participation. As well, these pilots were heavily promoted and participants, both mentors and learners, entered the pilots highly enthusiastic and feeling privileged to be able to participate. Although this is also the case with a minority of LBS participants, as evidenced through AlphaCom AlphaRoute discussion groups, this may not have been quite the case with the majority of onsite LBS participants.

AlphaPlus wanted to find out what issues programs in Ontario were having with using AlphaRoute and where the real concerns of programs lie. A distance delivery research study is currently being planned involving the use of AlphaRoute, and so it is critical that issues raised by LBS agencies in the onsite delivery of AlphaRoute in 2002-3 be taken seriously and addressed in 2003-4, as these issues will only be magnified in a distance delivery context.

The information in this report was summarized from a survey of programs in February of 2003. Additional information was included from AlphaCom AlphaRoute discussion groups: "AlphaRoute! Questions?" and "AlphaRoute Mentors". This information has been organized into the following sections:

- Background
- Perceived benefits
- Program readiness
- Reported successes and challenges
- Conclusions and recommendations

The Conclusions and recommendations section includes ideas from the AlphaPlus AlphaRoute staff, who have been working with the application and with LBS programs for a number of years and who want to see the potential of the online learning opportunities that AlphaRoute can offer be reached.

Purpose of the evaluation

Because being "online" is much easier and more common today than five years ago, users' expectations, even those who are not particularly Internet savvy, have changed. In working to support the use of an online learning environment in LBS delivery agencies, AlphaPlus wanted to know how this environment is perceived in key areas of usability and educational and online standards. AlphaPlus had been concerned about the lack of a consistent approach to literacy instruction and online instructional design on AlphaRoute, difficulties with navigation and using the learning management tools and wanted to find out if practitioners shared these concerns.

Since publication in September 2000 of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' document, *Tools for a new beginning: a strategy for computer-based learning in literacy*, agency coordinators and instructors have had increased exposure to using computers and online resources. AlphaPlus has delivered two training programs that fit with this strategy:

- AlphaPlus staff developed and delivered AlphaRoute training to practitioners from 127 sites using the Centra system
- The AlphaChum project included a training component that presented AlphaPlus' online services and resources to practitioners. The goal of the training was to enable practitioners to use AlphaPlus' online services in their programs, and at the same time to increase their computer skills.

AlphaPlus is working to build a community of practitioners in the field of elearning and with this evaluation hoped to get a sense of the progress made in the Ontario literacy field, to find out whether practitioners are adapting to AlphaRoute, and if they accept elearning as a valid way to build literacy skills.

There is a need for research on the practitioner's role in online learning, the education and supports necessary for practitioners, and how practitioners can be introduced to the idea of a blended learning approach to using tools such as AlphaRoute. Although AlphaRoute training sessions provided step-by-step instructions on how to use the AlphaRoute application to mentors, assessors, and technical support, it did not provide professional development or further support for this mode of delivery.

Programs participating in AlphaRoute training were generally enthusiastic and eager to use the application with learners, but expressed concerns during the training about delivering AlphaRoute in their programs. Practitioners in Ontario indicate to AlphaPlus on an on-going basis that they are struggling with AlphaRoute at their agencies for various reasons.

The survey was undertaken in order to answer the following questions:

- How are LBS programs using AlphaRoute?
- What issues, challenges, and concerns are evident and which issues are related to program capacity, training, and interest in elearning and which issues are related to the AlphaRoute environment itself?

In a desire to provide better support service for AlphaRoute and understand more about the challenges and successes that LBS agencies were meeting with in their efforts to use AlphaRoute, the program survey was carried out.

Method of evaluation

Due to the large number of questions in the survey and because the survey was conducted online, 71 sites were randomly selected from the Francophone and Anglophone streams and invited to participate in this evaluation process. This number represents 50% of the agencies that completed the AlphaRoute training. Mentors, assessors, and technical support persons were invited to complete the evaluation survey from those sites.

On February 24, 2003, the participating agencies received an email from AlphaPlus with a link to the online evaluation. The online evaluation provided both qualitative and quantitative data. In all, 26 questions were posed.

After a follow-up phone call to the agencies, 48 responses were received overall. From the Francophone stream 9 out of 25 participants responded, a 36% response rate. From the Anglophone stream 27 out of 46 participants responded, a 59% response rate.

13 agencies responded that they could not complete the survey either because they had not started using AlphaRoute or because of staff turnover.

The information we received during the evaluation process was then compiled and summarized in this report.

- Note: We have included the survey questions before each set of data whenever that was relevant. Any conclusions follow the data.
- Because many of the questions were open-ended or required personal responses, we have included some quotations from respondents. These appear in italics throughout the report.

Background information

The following questions help to define the AlphaRoute learner community during the period of this report, i.e., March 2002-February 2003

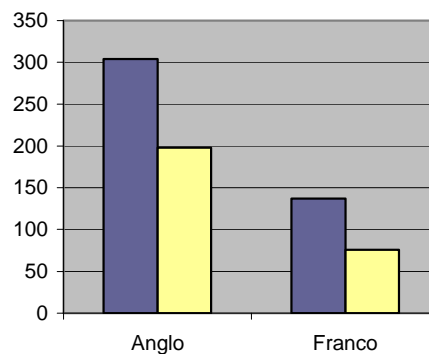
Number of learners using AlphaRoute

- **How many learners are registered to AlphaRoute at your agency?**
- **How many learners are actively using AlphaRoute?**
- **How often are they using AlphaRoute?**

Agencies were asked by stream to identify the number of learners they registered to AlphaRoute, indicated by the blue (dark) columns and the learners actively using AlphaRoute, indicated by the yellow (light) columns.

304 learners from Anglophone agencies have registered on AlphaRoute and 198 are actively using the learning tool.

In the Francophone stream, of the 137 learners who have registered on AlphaRoute, 76 are actively using it.



How learners are using AlphaRoute

- **Please check the ways in which learners are using AlphaRoute.**

Survey responses indicate that learners are using AlphaRoute in these ways:

- In computer labs
- After hours, individually
- During class

Respondents added that, in most cases, it was necessary to have the mentor present in the room in order to use AlphaRoute. At the same time, responses throughout the survey indicated that using AlphaRoute increases learner independence. This perception is corroborated in the AlphaPlus learner perception of AlphaRoute study currently being carried out.

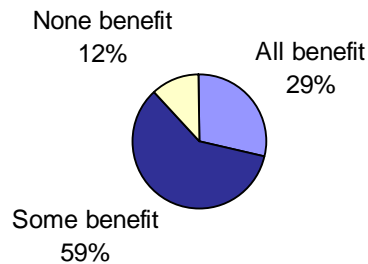
Since accessing AlphaRoute off-site is possible if learners have an Internet connection, AlphaPlus was interested in knowing if some learners were using AlphaRoute with a home computer. Although AlphaRoute has not as yet been promoted as a learn-at-home tool or a tool to be used for distance education, evaluation responses indicated that there are a small number of learners accessing their AlphaRoute account from home.

Perceived benefits

Are learners benefiting from using AlphaRoute?

→ **Would you say that most of your learners benefit from using AlphaRoute?**

Responses indicate that while a small percentage of programs think learners do not benefit, most find learning through AlphaRoute beneficial.



Anglophone practitioners said:

"It enhances their computer skills and at the same time helps them practice some of the concepts they have already learned. It gives them a break from the regular routine."

"AlphaRoute provides our learners with the chance to take control of their own learning, setting the pace and taking responsibility for their time and actions."

Francophone practitioners said:

"Some students like to work on AlphaRoute because it provides a break from routine. In addition, the activities reinforce their understanding in an entertaining way. Some students who were afraid of using the computer have succeeded and now use the computer for other work."

Program readiness

Commitment to use AlphaRoute

In order to receive \$1000 in grant support money to deliver AlphaRoute, agencies had to indicate on their business plan that they were prepared to deliver AlphaRoute.

AlphaRoute training was provided to practitioners whose agencies had made this commitment to MTCU and a small number of agencies interested but not committed to delivering AlphaRoute in their business plans. Each agency attended nine hours of training via the online learning system Centra.

AlphaRoute agency grant incentive

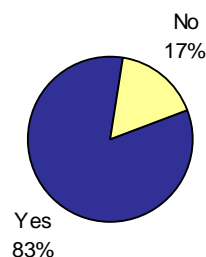
- ***Would your agency have signed on to use AlphaRoute without the ministry support money?***

Fifty-three per cent of participants reported that they would not have signed on to use AlphaRoute without the ministry grant incentive.

The commitment to complete 500 hours on AlphaRoute

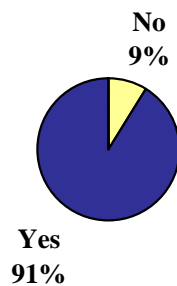
- ***Have you faced any challenges in trying to reach the target number of 10 learners using AlphaRoute for 500 hours this fiscal year?***

When agencies applied for the \$1000 grant from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and participated in training they also committed to enrolling at least 10 learners on AlphaRoute and having them generate 500 learner contact hours during the fiscal year 2002-03. Responses indicate that 83% of respondents had difficulty meeting the 500-hour commitment. Reasons ranged from not enough AlphaRoute content to lack of adequate staffing to fully support AlphaRoute learners.



AlphaRoute training

→ **Was the online Centra training adequate to get assessors/mentor started?**



Respondents reported that using an online environment for the training helped them to understand online learning better.

Anglophone practitioners said:

"I have found the Centra training very interesting since it helped me visualize working on AlphaRoute, something that would not have been easy to do had it been done in a regular workshop."

"I liked that I could go back and check the training modules as I needed."

Francophone practitioners said:

"The training allowed me to understand each of the roles better. When the need is there, we will use the documentation received."

Train-the-trainer

→ **How does your agency train mentors/assessors who did not attend the online training?**

Since training was presented to a maximum of three practitioners per agency, trained practitioners were then expected to train any colleagues or volunteers at their agency who subsequently committed to delivering AlphaRoute.

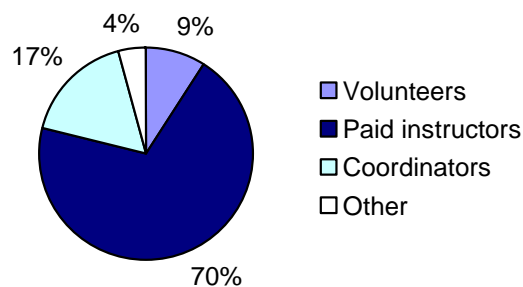
AlphaPlus was very interested to know if any such training occurred at the participating agencies.

Most agencies did not attempt to provide in-depth training to other staff. Limited financial resources, limited personnel and limited time are some of the reasons they did not offer train-the-trainer workshops.

Delivery roles

The following charts indicate who primarily is engaged in working with AlphaRoute in Francophone and Anglophone agencies. The majority of mentors are, in fact, paid instructors while coordinators are also involved in a smaller yet active way. Program volunteers make up 9% of the group of mentors.

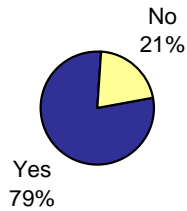
- ➔ **Who acts as AlphaRoute mentors in your program?**
- ➔ **Do the mentors also assess learners?**
- ➔ **Do the mentors also help learners with technical support?**



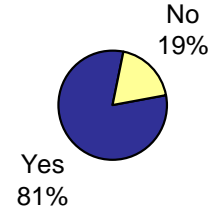
In most cases, the same practitioners take on all roles in the delivery of AlphaRoute.

While a few agencies divide the tasks among different people, the two charts below indicate that mentors often have the responsibility of assessing learners as well as providing learners with technical support.

Percentage of mentors assessing learners



Percentage of mentors helping with technical support



AlphaCom user support

AlphaPlus moderates two AlphaCom discussions that provide user support to LBS agencies using AlphaRoute. Approximately 170 participants are registered to each discussion. A far smaller number are active in posting messages, but when asked about the usefulness of the discussions in this survey, a number of practitioners said that they do not actively participate in terms of posting questions, but they do read the messages and gather information this way. A summary of information gathered from these two discussions is included on pages 16 and 18 of this report.

Supports required by the field to continue using AlphaRoute

AlphaPlus' goal during 2002-03 was to train agencies to deliver AlphaRoute and to support agencies in this delivery. The survey attempted to identify what, if any, additional support they needed.

→ **What other types of training/support would help you use AlphaRoute?**

Frequent responses included the following:

- More guided online sessions
- Extra funding to create incentives for instructors or volunteers
- Simplified manuals for learners
- Mentoring techniques
- Weekly or monthly emails to mentors noting any changes, updates or news items
- Printed resource with all of the activities
- On-site training follow-up
- Immediate technical support

Reported challenges and successes

Challenges

- *What, if anything, prevents learners from using AlphaRoute regularly?*
- *In your opinion, what are AlphaRoute's weaknesses?*

These two questions elicited similar responses from surveyed programs. These main challenges are listed below:

Quality of the activities

- Questionable content in terms of educational value for adult learners
- Lack of content e.g., very few numeracy activities
- Insufficient learning opportunities related to common learner goals
- LBS levels not consistently represented across or within activities; activities contain instructions that are too complex for the literacy level of the activity
- Lack of interactivity; many activities are just like reading "out of a textbook"
- Other sites are more interactive and provide more examples of the points being taught with increasing complexity
- There is not enough repetition of an activity to make sure it is learned
- Not enough diversity in the content
- The language should be easier to understand

Technical problems

- Answers are marked incorrectly
- Technical problems with some of the activities (audio not working, audio not matching visuals, error messages)
- Printing not legible (some are teaching learners how to Print Screen)
- Some activities do not load and cannot be used

Navigational problems

- Screen too busy, not enough white space, confusing navigation, where to go next
- Problems moving to the "Next Screen" or to an activity
- Organization and display of the list of activities
- Lack of visual cues to show learner where he was or where to go next in the list of activities

Design issues

- Small work area
- Can't see which activities were already completed
- The purpose of the Note Pad is unclear – ineffectively used in activities
- Dictionary page must be reviewed (users believe that the recommended dictionaries are supposed to be accessed through AlphaRoute)
- Instructions are too difficult
- At level 5, there are no instructions in the window

Use of portfolio

- Problems arise from the way learners are notified about whether work has been saved to the portfolio. This sometimes results in lost work; activities saved twice, difficulty for the mentor identifying work to comment on, and learners being able to see what the mentor has commented on.
- Learners cannot leave and return to an activity in progress to make changes or to resume
- No answer keys
- Answers appear in the portfolio as letter choices, i.e., the mentor has to go back to the activity to see what the letter answers mean.
- No notification to the learner when a mentor has replied or commented on learners' work

Time and skills needed

- Respondents noted the amount of time it takes to set up a learner on AlphaRoute and develop a list of activities, as well as mark, comment, or give feedback on work
- Mentors are too busy to correct assignments quickly
- Learners don't get the immediate feedback they like to have
- Students need tutor support when using AlphaRoute
- No extra staff time to devote to learning about and using AlphaRoute
- High staff turnover
- Irregular learner attendance and high learner drop out rates
- Limited computers
- Insufficient computer skills – for both practitioners and learners

Using the training plan

- ***Do you complete an AlphaRoute Training Plan to generate a list of personal activities for each learner on AlphaRoute?***
- ***If you answered yes, do you find this tool useful?***
- ***If you answered no, how could we change this tool to make it more useful for you?***

Of 22 people in the Anglophone stream who answered this question, 11 said that they use the training plan tool and find it useful. The 11 respondents who answered that they have tried to use it and do *not* find it useful revealed the underlying problems with the training plan tool in their comments:

- The training plan is not useful. When learners are assessed in a literacy program they develop a training plan with the assessor. They don't need another one in AlphaRoute
- The training plan is oriented only to AlphaRoute and does not recognize the individualized needs of the learner
- Training plan is very cumbersome and time-consuming
- It is difficult to select activities
- A "select all" option would make selection less time-consuming
- Data is lost when modifying a training plan
- It's too generic

Program recommendations for AlphaRoute

- ***Are there features in AlphaRoute that you would like to see updated or features you would like to see added?***

Responses to this question included the following:

- Voices should be added to all frames of level 1 to 3 activities.
- Illustrations need to clearly reflect the intentions of the activity.
- A new method to inform learners when their mentor has added comments to completed activities.
- A training section for the AlphaRoute email system.
- All activities should have corresponding answer keys.

Information gathered from AlphaCom discussions

The following challenges were expressed through "AlphaRoute! Questions?" and "AlphaRoute Mentors", both bilingual AlphaCom discussions moderated by AlphaPlus. These issues appear to support what was gathered in the survey and listed on pages 13 -15:

Issues

- How to track learner hours using AlphaRoute; what constitutes an AlphaRoute hour
- Technical trouble specific to the centre finding the problem– screens freezing, receiving error message, activities not loading properly
- Lack of quality of learning activities
 - Concerns about appropriateness of some grammar-related activities
 - Instructions confusing
 - Need for answer keys and "check answer" function
 - Need for more activities
 - Need for printed list of activities
 - Limited usefulness of activities – not complex enough; lack of reinforcement to aid learning – activities need to expand in scope and size
- Dysfunction of application
 - problems printing pages,
 - activities marked wrong when they are correct and vis versa, individual marks correct but total mark incorrect
 - case sensitivity, spacing sensitivity of application resulting in marking errors
- Navigational and general functionality issues
 - Problems moving back and forth from the portfolio to activities
 - Problems with screen size not rectified by individual screen adjustments
 - Difficulty trying to use training plan
 - Difficulty saving activity results to portfolio

One comment on AlphaCom seemed to summarize comments made by other practitioners:

"Unfortunately, most of the feedback I have received from students and tutors have been expressions of interest tinged with disappointment at their inability to utilize the system effectively as it currently functions."

Successes

→ *In your opinion, what are AlphaRoute's strengths?*

Respondents from the **Anglophone** stream mentioned that the strengths came from these things:

- Variety of activities
- The site's accessibility
- The tools appropriate for lower levels

→ *What areas of AlphaRoute have you and your learners been using the most?*

Most practitioners reported that learners on AlphaRoute used the learning activities the most, e.g., usually a presentation followed by some kind of practice.

Anglophone respondents mentioned by name the Anglophone newspaper, *The Learning Edge*, and the Driver's manual as the most-used activities. What these activities have in common is that they are highly visual, use sound and graphics, are interactive, and are corrected automatically.

Francophone respondents highlighted the fact that the learning tools such as the portfolio, availability of email, the Note Pad, and the Word List were well thought out, that the learners' opportunity to redo activities until their potential was reached is a great advantage, and that it helped to remove learners' fear of computers.

Blended learning

→ *Do you use AlphaRoute as an independent learning tool, or do you link AlphaRoute with other print-based/software/online activities?*

Responses varied when practitioners were asked if they used AlphaRoute as an independent learning tool or if they linked AlphaRoute with other resources. Most agencies using AlphaRoute also present a range of computer-based learning opportunities to their learners such as word processing skill acquisition, practice with educational software, and access to and instruction on using the Internet.

When asked if they integrate these resources (mentioned above) into lesson planning and literacy delivery, responses indicated that although some blend AlphaRoute with print-based activities, Web sites, and educational software, most practitioners do not integrate the range of tools available to them at the program site into lesson delivery.

Interest in creating a virtual community of learners

The following ideas were posted on “AlphaRoute! Questions?” and “AlphaRoute Mentors” AlphaCom discussion groups in 2002-3:

- Ideas for linking learners across programs
- Questions on how to deal with learner isolation
- Enthusiasm for collaboration /communication tools (café)
- Ideas for mentors to also participate in collaboration/communication tools
- Support for learners freely exploring AlphaRoute – so that they will feel part of a community, knowing others are doing the same
- Support for the use of email to create a virtual community
- Suggestion to include an online game or joke of the day to ‘hook’ learners into using email and other communication tools

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Analysis of responses from participants enables AlphaPlus to draw certain conclusions:

- AlphaRoute is a welcome addition to LBS program delivery and participants will continue to promote and use AlphaRoute.
- Programs see the benefits of using AlphaRoute to increase literacy skills as well as computer skills.
- Programs are interested in the idea of a virtual community of learners and creating a network to enhance the learning experience.
- Issues with AlphaRoute include application problems with navigation, design and lower quality learning content. The portfolio and training plan tools are particularly problematic for practitioners.
- Barriers to AlphaRoute use include the extensive time required to for mentors to become trained and the time and efforts required to support learners. In most cases, the mentor is also addressing the roles of the assessor and the technical support – this is a larger, more time-consuming role than anticipated.
- AlphaRoute training has been successful in preparing participants to use AlphaRoute in its current state, but the length and complexity of training, while currently necessary, is problematic. Also, AlphaRoute training has not addressed online learning in general and a blended learning approach to using AlphaRoute. Programs need guidance in best practices in this area.

Recommendations

Since AlphaPlus is committed to offering a quality online learning environment to agencies delivering Literacy and Basic Skills programs through the use of AlphaRoute, the following recommendations are made to increase user satisfaction:

- The AlphaRoute environment should continue to be improved and enhanced. Important tools such as the portfolio and training plan, for which issues were raised in the survey, should be renovated to create useful tools for programs.
- The entire area of content development should be re-examined in terms of instructional design and quality standards for adult learning. The effects of the current development process on quality should be examined.
- The site should be redesigned in terms of navigation to respond to concerns of practitioners and the need for learners to self-navigate and build self-management skills.
- Technical problems identified throughout this evaluation should be investigated to determine how they can be fixed and how programs can increase their skills in solving minor problems.
- Professional development in the areas of using online learning sites, blended learning approaches, best practices in elearning and benefiting from virtual communities should be explored.
- User training should continue to be provided for new AlphaRoute users and already-trained users.
- Current supports, such as AlphaCom support discussions and user guides, should continue, and new supports and methods of support should be pursued.

