

# Literacy Learning at a Distance – A New Approach



Prepared for the AlphaPlus Centre by  
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## **Introduction**

Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council has been pleased to offer *Good Learning Anywhere*, as part of the larger Distance Learning Project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) section and the National Literacy Secretariat. The Distance Learning Project, now in its third year in Ontario, and coordinated by the AlphaPlus Centre<sup>1</sup> in Toronto, engages four LBS-funded delivery agencies to explore possibilities for distance learning in Ontario. Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council is one of four participating literacy agencies.

## **Our Learning Community Profile**

Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council is a First Nations literacy organization that services learners in the community of Sioux Lookout and the surrounding area. Sioux Lookout is situated 280 km northwest of Thunder Bay and 380 km northeast of Winnipeg. If you are travelling to the northern communities of Ontario, Sioux Lookout is the final town with full amenities such as hospitals, banks, hotels, and an airport. The 35 communities directly north of Sioux Lookout have a total population of approximately 35,000 people, and are often accessible only by plane in the summer months and by ice roads during the winter. Many of the residents are First Nations adult community members who have not had the opportunity to develop strong structured educational backgrounds or to improve their existing reading, computer, and employment skills. In some of these communities, there are currently programs offered to high school and college students via video- and audio-conferencing. It appears, however, those individuals who would benefit the most – the people who need assistance to attain the literacy levels required to achieve success at the high school and college levels – are those who have had the least educational opportunity.

## **The Pilot Project**

Generous funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and the National Literacy Secretariat has made it possible for the Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council to deliver *Good Learning Anywhere*, a distance literacy education pilot project, in collaboration with AlphaPlus Centre, a Toronto-based adult literacy resource centre. Over the last three years, the Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council has been offering solutions for the literacy learner at a distance. Along our journey during that time, we have discovered many challenges and issues surrounding the obtaining and retaining of both online learners and mentors in Northwestern Ontario.

*Good Learning Anywhere* started with focusing on pilot groups in three locations. In two of the locations, a mentor/facilitator is available at the site for assistance and support. The third group consists of individuals who are living in isolated communities across the North. These learners are accessing literacy classes strictly by use of computer. Some are accessing home computers, workstations in the office, and computers at the local learning centre. Some learners have no assistance from anyone outside their online learning community. This pilot group began with 18 individuals preparing to upgrade for a college-level program. This group has now expanded, through community partnerships and word of mouth, to over 70 registered learners and counting. As of April 1, 2006, the Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council has delivered 77 classes. We have designed classes for different purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> AlphaPlus Centre actively supports research and promotes best practices in adult basic education, for practitioners and programs that work with adult learners in the Deaf, Aboriginal, Francophone, and Anglophone communities, through the innovative use of technology, research, and the design, development, and dissemination of information and resources. See <http://alphaplus.ca> for more information.

### **First Nations Management Training – 18 classes**

This group of learners is comprised of people who are currently holding positions in the band offices or in other places of administration in their communities. They require training in business, communications, accounting, et cetera, in order to fulfill the newly legislated requirements of their jobs. *Good Learning Anywhere* has provided upgrading in language and communications in order to help prepare these students for the college credit courses they are required to complete.

### **Pelican Falls First Nations High School – 22 classes**

The learners at Pelican Falls have had difficulty passing the required literacy test for successful completion of their high school diplomas. These learners live in a residential school outside of Sioux Lookout and are mature students who have returned to a literacy class to fulfill the requirements needed to graduate. *Good Learning Anywhere* provides these learners with a class to supplement what they are doing in school, to help strengthen the skills needed to succeed in attaining their high school diplomas.

### **Teacher Assistant Career Training (TACT) – 25 classes**

In partnership with Confederation College, TACT is providing workplace literacy training for those individuals working in schools in remote northern communities. These learners are teachers' aides, and many have had no training in the field. *Good Learning Anywhere* provides a platform for these students to acquire the skills they need to become experts in their jobs.

### **Pre-GED – 6 classes**

Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council is adapting the PBS Pre-GED program to suit the platform and geographic circumstances of our learners. Learners use computers to watch the CDs that are sent to them, do their lessons in their workbooks, and come together once a week on Centra to discuss assignments, do mini-lessons, and have any questions answered by an instructor.

### **English Primer – 6 classes**

The learners who participate in the English Primer class are attending in hopes of improving their English language skills. This class is run as an interest-driven program.

This distance project portrays the true meaning of the word "distance". All the learners are a considerable distance from the learning centre in Sioux Lookout. Some learners are as far away as Fort Severn, 450 km north of Sioux Lookout, and most learners we have never met face to face.

## **Technology**

*Good Learning Anywhere* has encouraged us to be creative in the types of technology we use to reach our learners and to facilitate our classes. There are many modes of technology and considerations for practitioners who are exploring the possibilities of distance literacy learning.

### **Mail**

Perhaps the oldest and slowest mode of reaching our distance students is still our most reliable. Much of the print-based material prepared for learners is sent by mail. Large packages such as *Good Learning Anywhere* binders or textbooks are usually sent this way to avoid huge airplane costs. Ordering the paper-based resources and having them ready to send requires much organization and preparation time. It can take several weeks for mail from Sioux Lookout to reach our learners.

### **Telephone**

The telephone has played an important role in direct communication with our learners. Learners are notified by phone on the day of their class and reminded to attend. Students often call with

questions about their work or about problems with technology. The Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council has a 1-800 number students can call to discuss school work questions or technology issues.

### **Floatplanes and Airplanes**

When an emergency arises, someone's headset breaks down, or a workbook is lost, *Good Learning Anywhere* relies on airmail to keep things on track. Whether it means racing a package to be delivered to a learner up to the airport, or down to the lake to the floatplanes, we have used this mode of technology when problems arise. We try to send small packages like CDs or copies of sections of the workbooks to tide the learner over until the mailed package gets there.

### **Fax**

The fax machine at the learning centre has become very active since we started our pilot project. Whether we are faxing notices to learners, or learners are faxing in assignments to us, the fax machine has become a very important tool for our project.

### **Videos and CDs**

Our TACT program and Pre-GED program both involve students watching videos for their classes. Our classes are using the PBS Pre-GED program material and other relevant documentaries that deal with the subject matter of their courses. We have burned copies of the relevant material to send to learners, because that is more convenient and less expensive to send.

### **Centra Symposium**

One of the greatest advantages of our partnership with AlphaPlus is our ability to access the Centra technology. AlphaPlus manages the use of Centra Symposium, a virtual classroom that enables real-time effective delivery of training and meetings for LBS agency use across Ontario. AlphaPlus Centre provides us not only with access to Centra, but training and support for using it, and also coordinates information-sharing meetings among all distance research partners. Centra technology provides a platform where synchronous online classes take place. This online classroom environment is user-friendly, fun to use, and provides anonymity with respect to students not being on camera, as they would be in a videoconference. When students enter the environment with a username and password, they can see the names of other learners in attendance, as well as the instructor's name. The environment allows learners to talk to the instructor, ask questions, "raise their hand", and even applaud and laugh with certain icons. *Good Learning Anywhere* has found this environment advantageous when working in a Native learning perspective. Many learners have commented on their relief at not having to be seen on camera.

Our instructors upload a **PowerPoint** presentation into the environment before class, and when the class starts, all participants can see the slides onscreen. The instructor can mark up the slides using various tools including a laser pointer, highlighter, arrow, et cetera, to help guide the learners.

The **Whiteboard** is a wonderful tool that Centra offers. While in this application, the instructor and/or students can write freely on the Whiteboard to ask/answer questions, draw diagrams, post information, and then save everything to the agenda so the Whiteboard can be revisited. The Whiteboard feature is used frequently during class.

Centra has other features such as **Web Safari**, which enables the instructor to take a class virtually to a website and share the site with the class. In turn, students can browse the website from their computers. This tool is used most commonly when an item or subject matter arises and the instructor wants to share more than just a description. For instance, in the TACT program, we were talking about cushions, and instead of just verbally explaining to the students, I took the

students to a website about sensory integration items. This allowed the students to see the items and explore other areas of sensory integration for themselves.

A feature called **Application Sharing** allows instructors to share documents previously created on their computers. The instructors can take the students anywhere on their computers to share documents pertinent to the lesson taught. We find that for our purposes, we use this tool the least.

The **Breakout Room** feature allows the instructor to break a large group of students into smaller workgroups, which can work privately and discuss their answers, make and save a Whiteboard, and then come back to the larger group to share their findings. Often, in face-to-face classrooms, teachers have students go out into the hallway to do group work, answer their questions on chart paper, and then return to the class to share their answers. The Breakout Room allows distance students to do the same thing – it's group work online!

Many of our learners have made comments about how “cool” the classroom environment is. Often, students don't want to leave and we have to have some discussion time each class to catch up with the happenings of the students in our online learning community. Centra technology provides opportunity for group work, presentations, class discussion, lectures, group web searches, and application sharing. Centra also allows for **recorded classes** which can be revisited if a learner wants to go back and listen to the class again, or wants to listen to a playback of the class if they have missed a session.

With the help of the AlphaPlus technical team, we have had few **technical difficulties with Centra Symposium**. There have been occasions of the server being down, or glitches that interfere with our classes: however, the team is working hard to make Centra a seamless operation. Our local technology expert has ensured that all our students have been able to attend class at least once. We find troubles with firewalls to be the most frequently occurring, and the most difficult to solve from a distance. Some students attend and can hear, but at times cannot be heard.

One of the best things we did for our learners was hire a local computer technician to be available to learners when they need **technical assistance for Centra Symposium**. The technician is hired on retainer and is available, whenever classes are running, to help the learners take care of glitches in their systems. We have also ensured that instructors are signed onto MSN Messenger so students can text message the instructor whenever there is a problem. At one point, we had an instructor online teaching a class, using Messenger to help one student, while speaking with another student on the phone. Once on board, our computer technician took over the calls, making the problem-solving workload more manageable for the instructor. Students who are in shared lab settings or communities have helped support each other in downloading Centra, setting up the microphones, or otherwise accessing the classes. Quite often this peer assistance has occurred without the input or direction of the instructors.

### **AlphaRoute**

Managed by the AlphaPlus Centre, AlphaRoute is an adult literacy online learning environment developed for the Deaf, Native, Francophone, and Anglophone streams of the Ontario LBS Program. AlphaRoute is for adults who want to improve their reading, writing, math, and computer skills to achieve their learning goals.

AlphaRoute is unique in Canada because it does all of the following:

- Targets adult literacy students who want to learn online
- Offers adult literacy students ongoing mentor support from trained literacy practitioners
- Offers Canadian online content and ongoing learning opportunities which complement and reflect learning goal areas such as employment, health, further education, and independent living, as expressed by adult literacy students

- Offers an online community for adult literacy students to learn online and to learn together, within a password-protected learning environment

We encourage learners to use AlphaRoute as a supplement to the online courses and print-based materials used when meeting with mentors/facilitators at their learning sites. Although we have a direct link to the AlphaRoute environment through our website, the vast majority of our learners have specific goals and guidelines to be met, and due to the minimal time available to work with those learners, they have not yet had the opportunity to use AlphaRoute as extensively as we would like. The majority of our distance learners come to us from community partnerships and have a specific curriculum and time period set out by their corresponding organization. This leaves access to AlphaRoute as an optional extra activity for the learner. In the case of learners who come to us independently, we are encouraging them to use AlphaRoute.<sup>2</sup>

### **Sioux-Hudson Literacy Website**

The Sioux-Hudson Literacy Council has also designed a unique website that has direct links to synchronous online classrooms, and that offers a solution to the growing number of First Nations learners who have had few opportunities to improve their literacy skills. Our website is hosted by the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) and can be found at [www.siouxhudsonliteracy.com](http://www.siouxhudsonliteracy.com).

This website is a user-friendly solution for helping learners find their classes and for providing a direct link to classes for learners. A handy reminder card, with our website address and the learner's username and password to access their classes, helps to ensure learner success in entering the class. A number of learners have been concerned about having to miss some sessions because of other commitments, and we are pleased that those learners could access the recorded classes and stay on track with their learning goals. Students also use the recording option to review classes they have already attended.

### **Keeping it Simple**

The most important lesson we have learned on our journey of distance delivery of literacy skills is to keep things as simple, as user-friendly, and as organized as possible. We provide the simplest route for our learners to download the Centra software to their computers and to gain access to their classes. Each learner is provided with a *Good Learning Anywhere* manual that introduces them to the program and the facilitators, and provides contact information and a CD with the four simple steps to downloading Centra. We also provide the students with a phone number for technical support available most times of the day. The students also receive the necessary technological accessories and textbooks/workbooks for their class.

We go to great lengths to ensure that the learners involved in the *Good Learning Anywhere* project are not frustrated or confused. We have found that if learners get to that point, they will be less likely to stick with the task at hand. It has been a priority for our organization to ensure that all aspects of the online literacy learning experience are thoroughly checked and rechecked. The dates, times, content, and links are as uncomplicated and fluent as possible. Technical support is always available to learners and instructors, as is training in using the software and equipment.

### **Sharing our Strengths**

Our learners have been able to experience a supportive learning community in an online environment where print-based and computer-based resources come together in a blended learning environment. Despite the great geographical distances between them, learners from similar walks of life and with similar goals are coming together. In the same way, the *Good Learning Anywhere* project aims to share our experiences, challenges, and solutions with other agencies that are attempting their own distance delivery literacy classes. We look forward to sharing information, created content, and presentations, and, in turn, to creating a learning

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<sup>2</sup> For further information about Centra Symposium and/or AlphaRoute, please contact the AlphaPlus Centre by visiting their website at <http://www.alphaplus.ca>.

community of distance delivery literacy practitioners. In this way, we will be able to broaden our audience by sharing teachable course materials and developed content that will help all agencies reach their goal of bridging the distance between the distance learner and their personal literacy goals.