CANADA'S SETTLEMENT SECTOR AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TECHNOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

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What has the settlement sector learned from the COVID-19 pandemic? What knowledge do we want to carry into the future? Whitney Loewen (The Immigrant Education Society) and Lisa Rochman (NorQuest College) consider the need for innovation in online service post the COVID-19 pandemic, and propose sharing and dissemination of resources as the best approach to long-term project sustainability.

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For many of us, it might be the importance of a responsive service model, one that can be offered on-site or online and in a hurry. Further, it might be an awareness that we have a role to play in building digital literacy alongside traditional literacy, particularly as service-providing organizations (SPOs) and funders see the promise in online services. Many of us realized the impact of income disparity and unequal access to the internet at the height of social distancing, with many SPOs scrambling to open computer lending libraries that could facilitate learning from home. Building on these lessons, we propose that there may be a way for the settlement sector to create a responsive online service model that a) meets our newcomer clients where they are, on the devices they may already be using; and b) encourages sharing resources across the sector, reducing development burden, maintaining innovation, and ensuring training and supports are available. In this brief article we consider a few examples.

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MEETING CLIENTS WHERE THEY ARE

To realize our responsive online service model there should be

increased movement to meet newcomer clients where they are already, including on the digital platforms that they currently use, rather than expecting them to adapt to the rigid one-size-fits-all model typified by traditional e-learning. Traditionally, many SPOs put significant resources into onboarding clients into desktop-based e-learning, with most online programs designed to be accessed primarily from a laptop or desktop. This approach required significant resources for development and training during the COVID-19 pandemic, when SPOs and funders were tasked with assembling computer lending libraries for the many clients who did not have reliable access to their own device. Further, the system often correlated low digital literacy on a PC to low digital literacy across the board; many thousands of hours and dollars were invested in pandemic-era digital literacy training, with the primary goal to onboard clients to laptops and desktop computers.

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In fact, according to the Canadian Radio-Television and Communications Commission (2018), more than 95% of newcomers to Canada own a mobile smartphone, and they are more likely than Canadian citizens to use their devices for daily tasks such as online banking and video streaming (Solutions Research Group, 2019). While there is significant value in laptop and desktop computer literacy for future work or studies, not all newcomers require this type of training. So why are we not meeting our clients on the devices that they already own and know how to use? Would an alternative approach yield better results for clients and SPOs?

DESIGNING LEARNING FOR ALTERNATIVE (MOBILE) MODELS

With respect to this question, The Immigrant Education Society (TIES) currently has three programs underway that are designed to study the impact of alternative online learning models. The HELLO (Hybrid Education Literacy Learning Optimization) Study is conducting comparative research on in-class, online, and hybrid training models and the unique challenges faced in each by LINC literacy-level clients. The ROSPI (Remote and Online Services for Professional Immigrants) research study is examining settlement service accessibility among immigrant professionals, and will evaluate a remote and online solution to identified service gaps (likely using smartphone technology).

Lastly, Bridge for Digital Youth (BDY) is studying the feasibility of smartphone-based employment training among newcomer youth. Participants will take part in an entry-level digital marketing career training program from their phones, with synchronous weekly classes hosted on Zoom and asynchronous coursework completed via TIES' mobile-friendly Moodle learning management system. Research from all three pilots will be shared with the settlement sector, with the hope that other organizations will build on this work.

Of course, an increase in options and modalities can create confusion for SPOs and clients not familiar with e-learning. To that end, NorQuest College has developed a tool that will assist newcomers and service providers in making informed decisions regarding modality for settlement services and language learning. The tool's recommendations are based on four dimensions; skill, experience, interest, and access. Learning plans to help newcomers prepare to succeed through different service delivery modalities are also available in seven languages, and are available for any organization to use. A corresponding digital literacy tool for settlement service practitioners can guide settlement workers in understanding their own digital literacy and how to grow in their skills, which in turn will allow them to better serve their clients. Findings from sector research conducted at TIES, discussed above, will allow NorQuest to expand and refine the tool.

SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH DISSEMINATION

In the nonprofit environment that typifies many settlement service providers, a lack of unrestricted funding and in-house technical support often means that long-term project sustainability post the funded period depends on disseminating the resource to the wider community for adaptation and reuse. In a sector where it can be a challenge to fund ongoing operations and administrative support positions (such as IT), all entities, including colleges and universities, may find it beneficial to open up their catalogue to outside expansion, as collaboration can mean that successful practices are continued.

A recent example can be found in NorQuest's Preparation for Online Learning program, which was originally conceived as an instructor-led class for Canadian Language Benchmarks 4-8 funded by the Government of Alberta. With permission from NorQuest (and funding from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada), the program was adapted and expanded by TIES' e-Learning team and renamed NICO (Newcomer Introduction to Classes Online), creating a new iteration that was student-driven, hosted online, and open to clients with a wider range of English language ability. The adapted NICO materials are offered as an Open Educational Resource (OER), meaning that anyone can apply to take the course directly on TIES' LMS or download the course files for installation on their own LMS.

In this way, projects can be sustained far beyond their initially funded period, and impact many more individuals than initially proposed, increasing the value of the initial seed funding and providing access to programming that might otherwise be out of reach for SPOs and clients alike. We would also like to note, however, that designing tools that will be used sector-wide (or designating them OERs) is best done from the initial planning stages and not as an after-thought, ensuring that the necessary components for usability and availability are factored into development. It often costs less to incorporate these aspects at the beginning, rather than try to add them into a completed project.

ADDRESSING ONLINE SAFETY

We have talked at length about bringing students online, the significant resources invested in digital literacy training throughout the pandemic, and the evidence that newcomers to Canada are already completing many of their everyday tasks online. With this increase in online service, building awareness of digital disinformation and scams is a need across the sector. With funding from Heritage Canada, NorQuest conducted a community needs assessment to identify common online threats and sources of disinformation, laying the foundation for the WebSafe program, a comprehensive online course providing training to identify and address digital disinformation. Respecting service takeaways from the pandemic, the course is designed to be used in either a fully asynchronous approach or embedded within a blended learning course, allowing instructors to choose the modality that best meets their students' needs (Light and Auers 2021).

Further, in recognition of the diverse learners that would be accessing the tool, a corresponding needs assessment tool can be implemented to identify the components that will be most beneficial for learners. This program was designed from the beginning as an Open Educational Resource (OER), accessible directly through NorQuest's website, or through downloadable SCORM packages that can be uploaded into the user's learning management system. As with the aforementioned NICO program, by designating WebSafe an OER, more SPOs and significantly more newcomers will benefit from the materials than would in a traditional proprietary approach. Through dissemination, the program attains a most elusive goal in the settlement sector: sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The settlement sector has made significant investments in technology over the last few years, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated that expansion. We can't stop here, though: as service providers, we should be evaluating our programs, identifying what works, and building on our research. Perhaps most importantly, we should be embracing collaboration versus competition, identifying where our goals intersect and encouraging one another to carry our work forward. In a sector with so much funding uncertainty, this is the surest investment in our hard work, and a key component in long-term sustainability.

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