



# Virtual Education in ELL

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Opportunities, Challenges and Potential

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# INTRODUCTION

## Background

In January 2015, the Centre for Excellence in Immigrant and Intercultural Advancement (CEIIA) at Bow Valley College, with funding provided by Alberta Jobs, Skills, Training and Labour, initiated the research project *Fostering Community Online: An investigation to mitigate issues of learner isolation and instructional distance in an English Language Learning (ELL) e-learning environment*. The aim of the project was to investigate and mitigate issues of learner isolation and instructional distance in ELL online learning environments.

The online learning environment chosen for analyzing and creating mitigation strategies was *Language for Work*, a pilot course developed independently of the research project. The *Language for Work* course included mitigating strategies that were present in the initial design of the course, mitigating strategies that were implemented as a result of the literature review, and mitigating strategies that were implemented as a result of feedback from the course participants. Throughout the course, participants were surveyed about their experience, and after the course a focus group was conducted to elicit more responses. This feedback was analyzed and changes to the course were made. Additional observations and recommendations were noted in the discussion section at the end of this paper.

## The Language for Work Course

### Overview

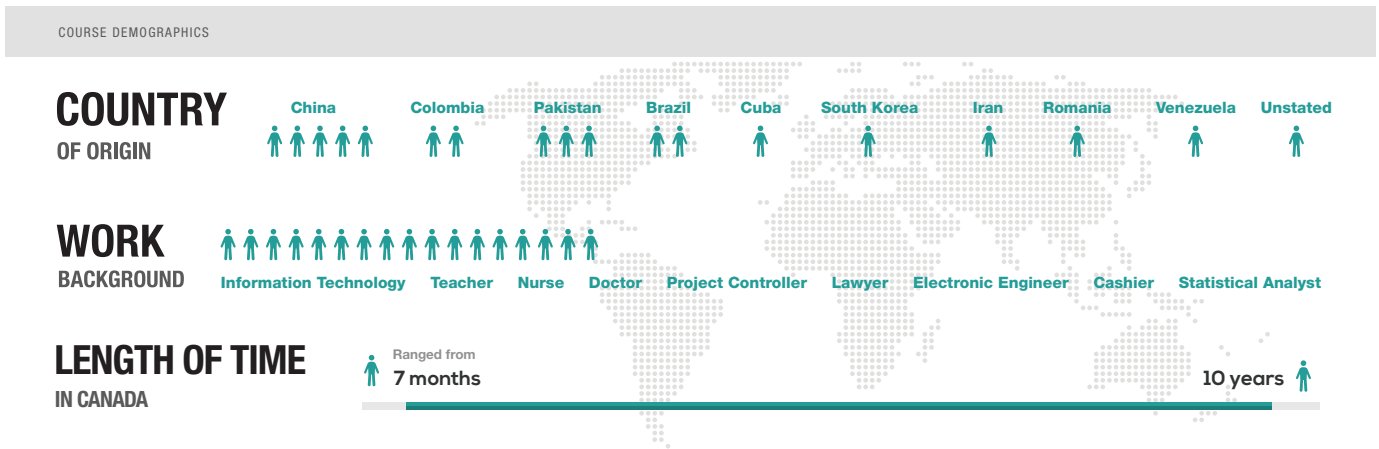
*Language for Work* was adapted from a government funded, blended format course focusing on language and pragmatic development. The course, conducted as a pilot run for this research, was delivered entirely online, and ran for eight weeks with approximately five to six hours of expected workload per week. The course was targeted at newcomers to Canada who are in or soon to be in the workplace. A primary reason behind the development of the course, and its adaptation into a more accessible online format, was to meet the needs of the working adult newcomer to Canada.

There was no tuition fee required for this pilot course, and there were no grades for the course – participants in the course were required to complete certain activities by set deadlines, and they were given a pass or fail status based on completion of the activities. Learners who passed the course were eligible to receive a certificate of completion.

### Demographics

Eighteen participants were recruited for the course. They were screened through a telephone interview to ensure that they had the necessary English language level (approximately CLB seven and higher). Potential participants were also informed of the goals of the course, along with the goals of the research project, the technical requirements of the course, the methods for withdrawing, and the time commitment involved. Information was also gathered about their work experience and expectations in Canada (See Appendix A - Screening Assessment).

30 people were referred for a telephone interview, and out of these interviews 21 people were invited to enroll. 18 participants eventually enrolled in the course, and 11 of these 18 (61%) completed the *Language for Work* pilot course.



## Course Activities

In the *Language for Work* course there were three main types of “in-class” activities that learners engaged with.

### SELF-PACED ACTIVITIES

The first type of activity was the self-paced activity where learners engaged with content (text, videos, and scenarios). For example, learners were required to follow a workplace scenario that included several conversations. Learners were given multiple choice options for dialogue and shown clips before submitting answers; immediate feedback was given for correct or incorrect responses. Once this was completed, full conversation videos (supplemented by commentary from a “culture coach”) were shown, text dialogue was reviewed, and follow-up interactive matching exercises were presented. Finally summary videos were provided to end the activity.

Culture as Our Lens: Description, Interpretation, Evaluation

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**Culture as Our Lens: Description, Interpretation, Evaluation**

**What do you see in the picture?**

**Look at the picture again; write comments under each of the categories based on the picture.**

<b>Description:</b> What I see (observed facts with no interpretation)	<b>Interpretation:</b> What I think about what I see (the meaning I attribute to what I see)	<b>Evaluation:</b> How I feel (my positive or negative evaluation or judgement) about what I see
<b>D</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>E</b>
type here	type here	type here
type here	type here	type here
type here	type here	type here

When finished click on **SUBMIT** to continue

← PREV NEXT →



## **DISCUSSION BOARDS**

The second type of activity was the use of discussion boards, where learners interacted with each other and with instructors. The course included twenty-three different discussion forums, requiring learners to post answers to open-ended questions or complete culture and language-based tasks. Learners were divided into four groups of five for these discussion activities (based on the specific discussion activity, the groups were later adjusted into two groups of six and ten). In addition to their initial posts, learners were required to respond at least twice to each other's posts (when applicable). Course facilitators also posted as needed (for example, when interaction was low and conversation was off-topic). As such, although the space was intended mainly for learners to interact with each other, it also allowed for interaction between learners and instructors.

## **DROPBOX HAND-IN ASSIGNMENTS**

The third type of activity was the completion of hand-in assignments. For these assignments, learners either answered reflection-style questions based on their own workplace and experience in Canada, or they applied the concepts they had learned in specific tasks, like completing a conversation using softened language or paraphrasing a directive. Learners were required to download a fillable PDF document, enter their answers into the document, save the document, and then upload the PDF document into the appropriate dropbox (a Desire2Learn (D2L) document submission function) for that assignment. Course facilitators then provided feedback on that assignment through a confidential dropbox feature, where only that learner could access and read the feedback. Some of the reflective hand-in assignments were summarized and posted on a discussion forum related to that topic.

## **Course Interaction**

Apart from the designated "in-class" activities in the course, there was planned interaction that took place outside of the course activities.

### **EMAIL INTERACTION**

Email was used extensively to communicate with the class participants, mainly on an individual basis. Reasons for using email were to solve technical and administrative problems like incorrect login information, inability to post on a discussion board, or inability to submit an assignment. As well, individual emails were used to establish initial contact with learners, and to inquire about learners when they were behind in their course work or had not logged into the course website for an extended time. Some learners used email to let facilitators know that they would not be participating over a certain period of time because of sickness or travel. On a few occasions, group emails were sent to inform learners about essential course news, such as the change in discussion form groups or the time and location of the course webinars.

### **WEBINAR INTERACTION**

The course webinar was another planned interaction that took place outside of the course activities. During the week before the course started, learners were required to take part in a webinar (offered twice, to accommodate varying schedules). The webinar provided an opportunity for real-time interaction at the onset of the course to introduce the course space, explain the online navigation and the course activities, and show the participants the location of the course help tutorials (including a recording of the webinar) on the D2L website. The webinar also enabled participants and facilitators to get to know each other. Two tasks were given to participants at the end of the webinar: to fill out their D2L profile, and to post their self-introduction on the "General Questions and Introductions Forum".

### **INSTRUCTOR UPDATES**

The *Instructor Updates* section of the D2L platform supported another planned interaction in the course. This function allowed the course facilitators to post messages on the course homepage for all of the participants to view. The facilitators used the *Instructor Updates* section to post essential news items related to the course (similar to the information that was emailed to the class as a whole) and to post weekly videos

about the course. The weekly videos consisted of the two course facilitators talking on screen about the course. These videos:

- addressed any technical problems with the course
- outlined some of the more relevant discussion from the previous weeks
- outlined course content for the upcoming week
- explained course concepts that may have been or were anticipated to be confusing for the participants
- motivated participants, at times, to keep up to date with their required course work
- were accompanied by commentary, in the form of on-screen text, summarizing the videos

# THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project *Fostering Community Online: An investigation to mitigate issues of learner isolation and instructional distance in an ELL e-learning environment* focused on the issues of learner isolation, instructional distance, and the mitigating strategies that help to combat the negative effects associated with these two concepts. The two purposes of the research were to conduct a literature review focusing on issues of learner isolation and instructional distance, and to create mitigating strategies for online ELL courses. The research was divided into two stages: the research design and the applied research.

*“The two purposes of the research were to conduct a literature review focusing on issues of learner isolation and instructional distance, and to create mitigating strategies for online ELL courses.”*

## Stage One: Research Design

The research design phase included an ethics review, a literature review, and the finalization of the following definitions:

- **Online community:** An online community is a virtual community whose members interact with each other primarily via the Internet. An online community can also act as an information system where members can post, comment on discussions, give advice or collaborate. In educational contexts, an online community includes interaction directed at educational outcomes and the dynamic interactions of cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Our online community will exist in a closed course hosted on our learning management system (LMS), D2L.
- **Learner isolation:** Feelings of aloneness or alienation created by being in a geographically dispersed asynchronous online learning environment.
- **Instructional distance or transactional distance:** refers to the theory of cognitive space between instructors and learners in an educational setting, especially in distance education. It is the overall effect that this distance between instructor and learners has on the educational experience (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).
- **Community building:** The development of a learning community, in this case, in an online environment.

At a deeper level, the literature review portion of the research sought to identify why it is important to foster social presence and teacher presence in an online community in an ELL context. The research design and literature review was driven by an assumption that the best practices for teaching and learning remain the same, regardless of modality, but how they are expressed will vary. For example, outcomes will remain the same, but may look different online. With a general sense of best practices in ELL for teaching and learning, the literature review focused on practices which:

- promote learner engagement
- encourage application of learning
- create a safe learning space
- support a sense of belonging
- support feelings of connection between learners and the instructor who are geographically dispersed
- increase retention rates

The literature review uncovered numerous factors that contribute to learner feelings of isolation in online courses and factors that contribute to instructional distance, as well as practices that have been shown to alleviate feelings of isolation and bridge instructional distance. A number of practices and mitigating strategies were identified and considered for how well they would fit into an ELL context. While the resources specifically focused on ELL contexts were limited, the literature review and the resulting discussion and recommendations have tried to emphasize the ELL context where applicable. A connection between isolation and community building was identified in the literature, as was a connection between instructional distance and presence. (See the full literature review in the next section.)

## Stage Two: Applied Research

The applied research stage included collecting data in the online classroom using a qualitative approach to assess mitigating strategies, analyzing the findings in this report, and then disseminating the results. The applied research attempted to ensure that course design encouraged cognitive, social and instructor presence. Ideally, course enhancements based on the applied research findings will inform future online development and delivery within our institution and the broader ELL community across Alberta. Projected indicators of successful application of mitigating strategies included:

- High retention rates
- Anecdotal feedback that supported learner engagement and teacher presence
- High degree of learner satisfaction with course delivery, content and online experience
- Identification of online tools that successfully encouraged engagement between learners and learners, learners and instructor, and learners and content (e.g. discussion threads, instructor announcement boards, instructor feedback to individual learners as well as to the group.)

Of the identified mitigating strategies, some were either already present in the design of the course, others were added, and others were not included. The discussion forum was a major element of the course, as was extensive use of emails and phone calls to establish relationships and rapport with learners. The hand-in dropbox assignments also provided opportunities for instructors to interact directly with learners. Thorough tutorials and a discussion board rubric were added to make explicit the navigation of the website and the expectations of the course. Synchronous, or real-time, communication was added to the course, along with the use of video for communicating course news. For various reasons, the mitigating strategies of a full orientation week, the presence of instructor office hours, and a simplified course structure were not included in the course. All of these mitigating strategies are discussed in the *Discussion* section.

## Research Method

The *Language for Work* course described in the previous section was the online learning environment chosen to implement mitigating strategies and generate learner feedback. Throughout the course, learners were asked for their feedback on the course content, the design, and about their experience in the online course. Three surveys were emailed to learners – the first at the end of the first week of the course, the second at the end of the fifth week of the course, and the third in the middle of the eighth week of the course (See Appendices B, C, & D - *Questionnaires*). Learners filled in answers in the Word document and returned the surveys by email. Fifty-four total surveys were emailed (eighteen each time) and thirty-three total surveys were returned (fourteen (77%) from the first survey, ten (56%) from the second survey, and nine (50%) from the third survey).

After the course was completed, an online focus group was conducted using the conferencing software Adobe Connect. Seven attendees (39%) attended the evening session, which lasted over an hour, and discussed open-ended questions relating to the course design and content. The participants used microphones and web cameras to build on each other's feedback and discussion. A recording of the session was saved and feedback was later transcribed. Primary data collection techniques (a structured questionnaire and a focus group) were mainly used for the applied research stage of the *Fostering Community Online: An investigation to mitigate issues of learner isolation and instructional distance in an ELL e-learning environment* project.



# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

The aim of the *Fostering Community Online: An investigation to mitigate issues of learner isolation and instructional distance in an ELL e-learning environment* research project is to investigate and mitigate issues of learner isolation and instructional distance in ELL online learning environments. Learner isolation is a consideration for online learning because it can have many causes, it can result in frustration for learners, and it can lead to decreased motivation and even a loss of interest in or withdrawal from the online course. Instructional, or transactional, distance is the feeling of cognitive space between instructors and learners in an educational setting, and can be especially high in distance education because of the lack of physical presence and the reliance on asynchronous communication (Du, Havard, & Li, 2005, p. 216 as cited in Hillen, 2014; Marstio & Kivela, 2014; Rovai, 2002). The purpose of this literature review is to explore the concept of learner isolation and its relationship with community building, to explore the concept of instructional distance and its relationship with presence, and to identify mitigating strategies associated with alleviating learner isolation and bridging instructional distance.

## Learner Isolation

Learner isolation is a feeling of aloneness or alienation that can involve many differing issues, making it a difficult problem for online educators- a problem that they can hope to mitigate but never completely solve. McInnery & Roberts (2004) provide a detailed outline of some of the issues that may cause feelings of isolation in online learners. Technical problems and low digital literacy skill levels have been shown to cause learners to become less engaged in an online course, to the point of discontinuing. Less experience with online learning and personal learning preferences are also cited as factors that contribute to frustration from isolation. Even the inherent strength of online learning, the affordance of non-concurrent participation in asynchronous communication, can give rise to feelings of frustration because of a lack of instant feedback, a lack of social interaction, a lack of immediate presence, and even physical isolation in a remote setting (McInnery & Roberts, 2004; Rovai, 2007; Appana, 2008; Idris, 1993 as cited in Zhang Perris & Yeung, 2005).

Learner isolation is a common problem in online courses, yet it is suggested that not enough consideration has been given to this problem (Mourad, Tarik, Pascal, 2015; Heath, 2004; McInnery & Roberts, 2004). In online and distance learning situations, participants lack a physical proximity, which carries with it tacit learning advantages – without ample connections and a discussion strategy, many learners will feel isolated (Du, Havard, & Li, 2005, p. 216 as cited in Hillen, 2014; Marstio & Kivela, 2014; Rovai, 2002). And while online courses often lend themselves aptly to flexible study and independent learning, these may also result in isolation and need to be balanced by support. Unchecked, feelings of isolation create adverse effects on learners' ability to participate and complete courses, and are often linked to increased course drop-out rates (Woodely, de Lange & Tanewski, 2001; Hillen, 2014; Anderson & Garrison, 1998).

## Alleviating Learner Isolation Through Community

Learner isolation can be mitigated through community building, as it is a way to combat feelings of aloneness and alienation by participants in online and distance courses. Learners who lack a sense of community in online courses experience less dialogue, presence, and interaction. For Rovai (2002), a lowered sense of community directly increases feelings of isolation in learners, making the creation of supportive learning communities a goal for all distance education courses. Connections and involvement are two community building aspects that, if lacking, can

lead to low motivation and to learners dropping out of the course. Specifically, social interaction can build relationships and trust; however, these interactions also need to be mitigated by instructors through design and facilitation to ensure the sense of community is not negatively affected by the many differing contexts, personalities and individual tendencies that exist among a given group of learners (Rovai, 2002; Rovai, 2007).

The works of Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), among others, introduce the concept of the Community of Inquiry, a framework for understanding the dynamics of emerging communities and the need for mitigation in online distance courses. The Community of Inquiry framework supports a “worthwhile educational experience” in online computer mediated communication (CMC) environments where electronic text and written forms of communication dominate over oral language – where language undergoes a shift from primarily oral communication to written text. The shift away from face-to-face and spoken word communication has the drawback of “leaning down” the communication in that it does not include as many non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects of communication. Written text also tends to promote the transmission of information, rather than a collaborative processing of information better suited for groups and communities. However, the shift to text does provide ample time for reflection, which sets the learning space for a potentially higher cognitive, more complex understanding of content. Although CMC environments contain advantages, text and the written word alone may not always be sufficient for higher-order thinking (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000).

In online learning, a Community of Inquiry is essential for the development of a successful educational experience - one that includes deeper, critical and higher order thinking. The element in the Community of Inquiry model “that is the most basic to success in higher education” is the collection of interactive qualities such as questioning, challenging, negotiation, and problem- solving. However, these cognitive experiences cannot be sustained unless supported by a social context that transforms the transmission tendency of text and written word into interactive, collaborative communication. Social relationships and social interaction provide the support and comfortable feeling that learners need to sustain higher-order cognitive activities. In this way, the cognitive aspects of collaboration cannot be separated from the social context. While both aspects contribute to reduced feelings of isolation and the maintenance of learner motivation, the relationship between cognitive involvement and social connections is “bound together” by the design choices and facilitation actions of the instructor. Social presence helps to sustain cognitive presence in online communities, and it is instructor presence that influences the development of the social and cognitive presence in online learning communities (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The next section on instructional distance explores the concept of presence, with emphasis on instructor presence.

## Instructional Distance

Instructional distance, or transactional distance, refers to the theory of cognitive space between instructors and learners in an educational setting, especially in distance education. Moore and Kearsley (2005) explain transactional distance as the overall effect that distance between instructor and learner (no matter how geographically large or small) has on the educational experience. In distance education contexts there is the matter of geographic distance between instructor and learner; however, it is the effect of this distance - the resulting impact of this distance on understanding and communication between instructors and learners- which is important to consider. This gap must be “bridged through distinctive procedures in instructional design and the facilitation of interaction” (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p.223). Garrison (2000) points out that Moore does not detail the exact relationship between dialogue and structure (and autonomy), perhaps leaving much to context; however, he does note the importance of transactional distance as a major landmark in moving toward a pedagogical perspective in distance education. Transactional distance puts the focus on the functions of the instructor as well as the instructor’s choices and actions.

Transactional or instructional distance involves a relationship between dialogue and structure that is dynamic between instructors and learners. Dialogue is the interplay of words and actions between instructor and learner- a series of interactions that generate response. Class size and language are two factors that will affect dialogue – the larger the group, the less dialogue each learner will likely experience; and learners who



are participating in a course in a second language, for example, will also likely experience less dialogue. The other half of the dynamic relationship of transactional distance is structure, or course design. Decisions about learning objectives and outcomes, content delivery, media selection, as well as restrictions of course timetables, nature of content, institutional technology and communications, instructor style, and even academic or language level of the learners all play a role in the relationship with dialogue, producing the effect of transactional distance. When either dialogue or structure in a course is low (and especially when both are low) transactional distance is said to be high, and learners need to study more independently and with more autonomy, which may run the risk of feelings of isolation (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

In considering the perceptions of the distance learner, Shin (2002) offers the related concept of “Transactional Presence” useful to consider for its connection with transactional distance. This notion of presence is defined as the degree to which a distance learner perceives the availability of, and connectedness with, other parties involved in a given distance education setting. Shin includes the concept of presence as an embedded part of the transactional in distance learning because it is participants’ perceptions of presence that must reach beyond mere social presence to create an educational connection that satisfies the needs of the learner in distance learning. While the concept of transactional presence in distance learning may exist more generally than instructional or transactional distance, which focuses largely on relationships involving the instructor, both are concerned with a ‘relatedness’ between structure and dialogue and the effect of action in distance learning on feelings of contact – transactional presence is concerned more with social presence, whereas instructional distance can be said to focus more on instructor presence (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Shin, 2002).

## Bridging Instructional Distance Through Presence

As introduced in the previous section on learner isolation, the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) emphasizes the relationship between three types of presence: cognitive presence, social presence, and instructor presence.

- Cognitive presence is the ability for learners to construct meaning through communication, needing a particular amount of awareness in distance learning because the medium of communication shifts largely from face-to-face to computer mediated communication (CMC). Cognitive presence, thus, is much more dependent on support from social presence and instructor presence in CMC situations.
- Social presence is the ability for learners to connect with other participants as “real people” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Shin offers several interpretations of social presence that include phrases like joint involvement, feeling of contact, degree of salience in relationships, and a degree of perception as a real person, all in the context of CMC (Shin, 2002). Instructor presence is the design and facilitation actions of the instructor (or, collection of instructors, designers, and all those responsible for delivery of the course).
- Instructor presence supports the relationship between cognitive and social presence, ultimately for achieving course objectives. The relationships between the three types of presence are supported by interaction that is specifically designed with respect to the shared goals, outcomes, and objectives as stated in the course or program (Anderson, 2003).

Stromman (2015) identifies social presence as an important force of an online learning community. In citing several sources, Stromman supports the research that social presence is what makes people feel connected and aware that others are listening, and goes as far to interpret social presence as the driving force behind online communities. Stromman also shows that social presence is directly affected by instructor facilitation. Stromman studied data and interview feedback from learners involved in asynchronous discussions and although the learners favoured a quick response time to their posts, when it was facilitators who responded quickly, social presence did not have room to develop. Stromman specifically mentions that facilitation strategies on the part of the instructor (limiting salutations, modelling focused discussion, summarizing keywords) are needed for effective communication with educational purpose (Stromman, 2015).

Boettcher (2011) lists faculty (or, instructor) presence as the first best practice of online teaching. Faculty presence in online environments, for Boettcher, means instructor engagement multiple times a week (if not daily), setting clear expectations for instructor presence, and setting expectations for how learners will communicate and approximately how much weekly time they are expected to devote to the class. Consistent and frequent participation, through discussion boards, forums, and announcement tools, will communicate to learners that instructors are present and care about the learners in the class.

Heyman (2010) also suggests the need for ongoing instructor presence to build community in online courses, and even notes Appana's (2008) use of the phrase 'eSolated' to refer to the feelings of isolation when instructor presence and institutional support are lacking. Instructor presence is linked with course and institutional support, as indicated by learners in Heyman's study, reinforcing the idea that an instructor is often the point of contact between learners and the institution (Humphries, 2015).

Heath (2004) notes that collaboration and comfort with the facilitators in an online course may reduce feelings of learner isolation, and are important for the success of an online course. Referring to this as social presence for instructors, she states that it can come in the form of prompt feedback, biography information, photos, discussion participation, and synchronous communication. Feedback from a survey of online nursing learners showed that learner feelings of being disconnected were avoided when instructors posted photos and biographies of themselves, responded to learner comments quickly, actively prepared learners for discussion, and provided an alternate forum for social interaction (Atack & Rankin, 2002). Ultimately, Heath's recommendation to solve the learner isolation problem is to create an environment with ample interactive activities (Heath, 2004).

Shea, Hayes, and Vickers (2010), in a review of instructor presence in the Community of Inquiry framework, note that the elements of instructor presence are limited to design (including organization) and facilitation. These elements roughly coincide with the concepts of structure and dialogue in transactional distance. Instructor presence is also linked by Shin (2002) to the concept of transactional distance, in that they both include the interplay between dialogue and structure in distance learning. So, while a Community of Inquiry involves the relationship between all three types of presence, it is instructor presence (including administration, design, facilitation, and direct instruction) that is most directly under instructor control (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Instructor presence is directly linked to the actions of the instructor and the mitigating strategies that instructors must contemplate, decide, and ultimately act on. The next section of the literature review details specific mitigating strategies associated with alleviating learner isolation and bridging instructional distance, as they relate to course structure and support, media and interaction, and discussion forums.

## Course Structure & Support

The structure dynamic of instructional distance in a course is most easily understood in terms of course structure and support. The design and layout decisions directly set the space where community will develop, and can either foster or hinder the community building process. The structure of the course should be apparent and clear to the learners and visible on the course home page. As well, the course should be aesthetically pleasing and inviting for learners. Decisions about course layout and the location of the course elements will take the course website beyond acting merely as a repository of information. To implement these decisions, instructors may need to seek out technical assistance or expertise from within the institution (Mabrito 2004). Decisions about course structure will involve the display and navigation of the course, orientation to the course, the location of tutorials, accessibility of central documents, and the establishment and diffusion of instructor office hours and contact information.

### Navigation

Shaw & Polovina (1999) suggest that course navigation plays an important role in minimizing isolation. Specifically, ease of navigation through the course structure will reduce the time and effort learners face in accessing course content and activity. In order to reduce the potential for feelings of isolation, the course website requires intensive planning and should be designed to build a virtual community. Navigation starts on the home page and ideally strikes a balance between too much information and not enough information, conveying to the learner their options and the actions they need to take (Mabrito, 2004). The interface of the course platform is of particular concern in an online setting because learners are unable to receive immediate feedback from observing instructors and other learners, or by asking questions of a classmate in the same way that they can in face-to-face environments. An intuitive and supported interface will orient learners to the class (Henry & Meadows, 2008).

### Orientation

Orientation to the class is often done alone, and at high risk for developing feelings of isolation, frustration and even alienation from the content and community. Instructors need to anticipate potential problems and either adjust the course design accordingly, or address these concerns directly through support materials, forums posts, emails, or other direct communication. Learner feedback is essential in this process, as learners will not always make it known that the course structure is confusing until later in the course, if at all. Opportunities to express feedback are important elements in refining course structure and navigation. Continual updates on potential problems areas, and requiring confirmation that learners have received and understood the information that has been dispersed to them can ensure that navigation problems do not impair the course (Henry & Meadows, 2008).

The course design itself should accommodate sufficient time to allow for learners to get used to the online space. Salmon (2004) describes an orientation period needed in online courses that provide time for learners to ensure login and passwords work smoothly, and time to find and become familiar with the course spaces, content, classmates, and facilitators. Not only does an orientation period at the onset of the course create a buffer zone to sort out any technical problems, but the absence of this orientation time can adversely affect motivation and community at the start of the course when it is most crucial. Instructors are essential support during this time and need to maintain communication and presence by actively welcoming learners, having answers to content access and support requests, providing explicit instruction about the technology tools, and allowing learners sufficient time to orient themselves to the online space. Important elements of socialization and information later in the course cannot take place without this initial orientation period. The absence of an orientation period at the start of an online course may make difficult later in the course the establishment of learner identities, initial interaction between learners, opportunities for further interaction, peers getting to know one another, instructor technical and online communication support, and encouragement for learners. Ideally, ample time allotted during the start of the course for this initial orientation will take learners successfully through initial peer contact into community building, knowledge construction and beyond (Salmon, 2004).

## Tutorials and Central Documents

Information overload may be especially easy to trigger in courses that do not rely on physical space and for learners who identify as ELLs. For online learners who are largely left to orient themselves to the online space, it may not always be evident where content or support is located – the efficiency of navigation largely relies on prior experience, when learners are in doubt. For ELL users, the absence of non-verbal and paralinguistic communication may make the interface and navigation language unfamiliar or require more time and intuitiveness (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). A central document or course study guide (including the course outline and syllabus) can act as a “go to” document for learners to prevent them from feelings of uncertainty and being lost, especially if this document explains the navigation of the course and anticipates questions in areas where learners might feel frustration. The study guide will convey to learners the structure of the course, and provide detailed information about assignments and assessment criteria, for example, making it the learner’s main reference to content, structure, and activities in the course (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000; Henry & Meadows, 2008).

## Office Hours and Contact Information

Mabrito (2004) and Boettcher (2011) detail the importance of virtual office hours in which learners have the opportunity to access the instructor and receive immediate feedback. Online office hours provide the learner with the ability to receive more immediate feedback from the instructor, a factor that encourages learners to log in and visit the online course page (Krish, Hussin, & Sivapuniam, 2011). Additionally, providing clear and detailed contact information, and even fielding non-course related technical or administrative questions will help reinforce presence and reduce frustration, as instructors are often the point of contact between learners and the institution (Humphries, 2015). Encouraging learners to actively follow through using contact information can add elements of synchronous communication (telephone, chat, conferencing, face-to-face) into the course for learners who may feel the desire for more immediate feedback (See Synchronous Communication below).

## Multimedia & Interaction

Multimedia and interaction represent a mix of both structure and dialogue decisions for instructors. Interactivity can result in high levels of dialogue and is often equated with levels of engagement and learner satisfaction. Yet the decisions about which media to include in the design of the course, and how to communicate the finer messages of course content relate to design and structure of the course. Different types of media allow for different types of interaction, and a mix of multimedia elements in a course will provide not only activity, but also a variety of interaction for learners who may prefer certain types of media over others (Mabrito, 2004). A mix of media will also cater to the needs of ELLs in that language is presented more robustly than in basic CMC situations, where text and written words dominate. The mix of interaction and multimedia does not require any set balance, but depends on context, with high levels of one type of interaction sufficient for deep and meaningful formal learning to occur (Anderson, 2003). Included in the mix of multimedia and interaction are considerations for initial and one-to-one communication with the learners, access to synchronous communication, and a conscious effort to include a variety of diverse media in the course.

## Initial and One-to-One Communication

Garrison (2007) discusses the dynamic nature of social presence and the need for open communication at the start of a course, similar to Salmon’s (2004) orientation time at the start of a course. Garrison focuses less on design, concentrating more specifically on the social relationships between learners that help to establish community. He points out that only after community has been forged can more purposeful, educational interaction take place. The shift from open to purposeful social interaction is essential in the establishment of an online community. Garrison notes that developing these ties takes time, and discusses the potential for face-to-face activities to influence this shift. The development of a community that sustains itself around a purpose (educational goals) starts out as personal and open communication. Once these bonds strengthen, it can lead to a learning community (Hammond, 2000).

Initial instructor contact with learners individually is important for engaging learners in the course and ultimately reducing feelings of isolation. Email contact with learners, initiated by the instructor and consistent throughout the course (although, again, with balance), creates a positive environment and is a factor in establishing instructor presence. Email and one-to-one contact between learners and instructors is often lost online in the push for community building and collaboration. Research on instructor interaction with learners in online courses has often only focused on discussion forum interaction, leaving out a holistic understanding of the roles played by instructors in online learning (Shea, Hayes, & Vickers, 2010). These types of one-to-one connections may help motivate individual learners and can signal to a learner that the instructor is available for more synchronous modes of communicating. Establishing a relationship with the instructor may make learners more comfortable participating in the shared course space (Mabrito, 2004).

*“Email and one-to-one contact between learners and instructors is often lost online in the push for community building and collaboration.”*

## Synchronous Communication

McInnery & Roberts (2004) highlight the need for synchronous components in online course facilitation that can help to build communities and reduce experiences of isolation by both learners and educators. The use of most types of synchronous communication can make it easier for participants to move from feeling like an ‘outsider’ to feeling like an ‘insider’. Becoming an ‘insider’ in an online class implies a certain level of comfort and confidence with the medium used for communication. The term also represents a certain social ‘threshold’ whereby learners will consider themselves a part of the online community of the particular class (Wang & Newlin, 2001; Wegerif, 1998). Crossing this threshold is made easier with the use of synchronous communication (McInnery & Roberts, 2004).

Mourad, Tarik & Pascal (2015) state that online learning offers great opportunities for active participation on the part of the learner and the instructor, suggesting that active participation can be achieved through dialogue and instructor presence in both asynchronous and synchronous activities. While their research focuses specifically on hand gesturing technology with the intent of replicating a face-to-face context, the authors illustrate active participation at a more general level. Through the use of USB cameras and videoconference, instructors are able to experience the natural and intuitive feedback of real-time communication and physical movement. Showing the ways that synchronous communication can be enhanced in online learning situations, they also illustrate how the implementation of synchronous activities can overcome learner’s feelings of isolation. This resonates with the findings of McInnery & Roberts (2004) above- that synchronous communication is an important element in building community.

## Diverse Media

Elements of the course will also benefit from multi-media diversity, as Mabrito (2004) reminds us that “not all learners are text-based learners”. Additional graphic representations, hands-on simulations, and audio content will provide learners with multimedia options and multiple channels for accessing and experiencing content. Even supplemental material can be provided in a variety of media. Offering multiple audio and video resources can let learners choose the learning experience that suits their preference and lifestyle. A diversity of media may be especially pertinent in ELL contexts in online learning. CMC environments are often dominated by text and written word, and can be balanced out with the addition of graphics, audio, video, and other types of media. An example of this would be the tutorial documents discussed earlier – when these types of support documents are offered in diverse media, the learner can experience language in several modes (audio, video, text, graphic, synchronous, etc.) reducing the potential for miscommunication through language. However, the variety of these resources will often be restricted by time and technical abilities of the course facilitators and creators (Mabrito, 2004).

## Discussion Forum

In citing Lomicka and Lord (2007), Fujioka-Ito explains that online communities reduce the potential for learner isolation by increasing interactions like discussion and collaboration. The use of an asynchronous communication tool like a discussion forum provides learners with more flexibility, reflection, and time to take part in a task. If used effectively with well-planned activities, discussion forums can provide a socially rich space for learners (Fujioka-Ito, 2013). Online discussion forums provide learners with a space to interact with other learners and the instructor that are flexible for them because they can contribute to the discussion when they want (within the range of due dates) without pressure to initiate or respond immediately (Strømman, 2015). Discussion forums differ from in-class discussions because of their asynchronous nature, lending themselves to more reflective questions and conversations, and more learner reflection both prior to and after posting (Hewitt, 2005). Hillen (2014) goes as far to say that discussion boards are an indispensable part of online courses, allowing for “maximum learning flexibility” for both learner and facilitator.

Discussion boards provide a place for learners to develop social presence, which is needed to produce cognitive presence in an online course supported by a Community of Inquiry. Discussion forums also provide the opportunity for instructors to develop their instructor presence, both through facilitating the forums and by actively developing instructor presence by taking part in discussion (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Even an additional forum, specifically set aside for social interaction, can be a valuable relationship-building asset for online courses.

### Facilitating Discussion Forums

Discussion forums suit open-ended questions and follow-up probing, and can be used to offer some choice on the part of the learner. Due dates for required posts can be staggered, and learners will benefit from stated guidelines for posting and responding. Ideally, discussion forum questions will also relate content to current events and news, where applicable. Guidelines for learners' initial posts and response posts can set expectations for what instructors are looking for in the forum's posts, and provide learners with a strategy for generating further discussion. As well, providing some options for the learners (several questions, or staggered posting deadlines) will let them customize their learning to suit their own experience and learning goals (Boettcher, 2011). Smaller groups pose an alternative strategy to full-class discussion forums – with fewer people in each group, the volume of messages that each learner needs to read through can be limited and the discussion board concentrated on fewer discussion threads. In smaller groups, learners may feel motivation to post more often because their contributions play a larger, more relevant role to the discussion (Hammond, 2000).

While it is difficult to know what type of message posts result in more interaction, research cites what types of messages will stop any conversation at a “dead end”. An abundance of questions, summary posts, “personal salutation” posts, agreements, threatening or aggressive posts, superficial comments, off-topic discussion, and low perceived usefulness of a message are all examples of reasons why discussion in forums may stagnate (Hewitt, 2005; Strømman, 2015). A consideration for purposeful social presence (Garrison, 2007) - social presence related to educational goals and objectives - is a key form of interaction for instructors to watch for, and to reinforce, while facilitating discussion forums and attempting to foster community through discussion activities (Strømman, 2015).



## Instructor Presence in Discussion Forums

The discussion board is a common space that enables learners to interact with each other, ideally overlapping with instructor presence and including the teacher as a member in the community (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Instructor participation in the discussion forums provides opportunities to highlight not only content but class communication.

When instructors are active participants in discussion, the discussion forums become a dynamic part of the course, making it easier for learners to become active in the course by following the instructor's lead. Expectations for participation in the discussion forums need to be laid out or demonstrated (either in a high structured or low structured approach) so learners can accurately measure their own actions against what is expected of them (Mabrito, 2004; Strømman, 2015).

*“When instructors are active participants in discussion, the discussion forums become a dynamic part of the course, making it easier for learners to become active in the course by following the instructor's lead.”*

Rovai (2007) notes the difficult balance that facilitators need to maintain when participating in the discussion forums – they need to maintain a social presence without establishing themselves as the centre of discussion. One suggestion he offers is to avoid responding to posts too soon after initial posts have been made. This is a fine balance, as facilitators that post too authoritatively and facilitators that do not post enough are both reasons why a discussion forum might stop growing (Rovai, 2007). Other reasons why discussion in a forum might stagnate include simple loss of interest because the course is not-for-credit, discussions that have been exhausted, unclear expectations, and participants who give discussion threads only one reading. Regarding the problem of “only one reading”, discussion boards often come with a feature that flags discussions with new posts – class participants are instinctively drawn to discussion with the most new posts indicators, at the expense of existing threads that may have more to offer (Hewitt, 2005; Morrison, 2013).

Heath (2004) mentions specifically the use of a threaded discussion (discussion forums) for community building and the need for instructors to carefully facilitate threaded discussion by noting agreements and disagreements, encouraging the class to build consensus, and recognizing learners' contributions to the discussion. Prompt responses and consistent levels of participation may contribute to active discussion and high instructor presence, although as mentioned, Rovai (2007) notes that this is a fine balance. Social “ice breakers” may help learners develop the skills or mindset to enable them to participate in an interactive discussion forum. This type of initial activity, conducted on an asynchronous discussion board, may also help learners start to develop the idea of an online identity or an online “self” (Heath, 2004; Shea, Frederickson, Pickett, & Pelz, 2004).

## Additional Discussion Forums

Additionally, a separate “lobby” or separate “social” discussion board is useful for providing space for learners to interact with each other and ask questions. The presence of an additional forum can work towards building social ties among learners and instructors, and provide another outlet for peer or instructor support where learners can ask questions. An additional forum can also lighten the number of posts and information on formal discussion boards, keeping them on-topic because learners have a place for side or “spill-off” conversation (Hillen, 2014; Rovai, 2007; Humphries, 2015). In classes where language learning is a goal (either a primary or secondary one) discussion forums act as an additional space for learning and practicing language (Krish, Hussin, & Sivapuniam, 2011). Learners are provided with a space where they can use language relevant to the course, and receive in-context feedback. Ideally, a course conference room will also provide learners with the ability to use audio and video for chat sessions or group work (Heath, 2004).

# Summary

## Learner Isolation

The broad goal of this literature review was to explore the concepts of learner isolation and instructional distance, and to identify mitigating strategies associated with these concepts. Learner isolation is closely linked with online community building, and shares many of the same behaviours that actively build community in an online course with those that alleviate learner isolation. These behaviours include dialogue, connecting with others, active involvement, and social interaction, which needs to be mediated by instructors to avoid activity that may actually work against community building. Technical problems and digital literacy need to be supported because the inherent nature of online learning and asynchronous communication, while providing many benefits, can easily result in feelings of isolation due to inherent lack of immediate presence and intrinsic communication. Language itself changes in online environments. The shift from primarily oral, face-to-face communication to text may be challenging, especially for ELLs.

## Instructional Distance

Instructional or transactional distance represents a move from simple geographic considerations of delivery and access in distance learning to the pedagogical strategies that can help shape the effect that this distance has on learning. Referring to the cognitive space between instructors and learners in an educational setting, instructional distance is useful to consider in distance education because instructors must make decisions about the course design that will either bridge the cognitive gap or widen it. When the gap widens, learners are left more to their own direction and autonomy, increasing the chances for frustration and feelings of isolation in distance learning. Instructional distance includes the dynamic relationship between structure and dialogue, putting the focus on the choices and actions of the instructor, which makes instructor presence an essential consideration for distance learning delivery. While building community in an online setting requires relationships between three types of presence (cognitive, social, and instructor) it is instructor presence that this research is most concerned with, as the mitigating strategies that instructors must employ in online learning directly bind the social and cognitive presence of the learners.

## Mitigating Strategies

Several mitigating strategies were identified in playing a factor for considering learner isolation, community building, instructional distance, and presence. These strategies were broadly categorized under the headings of Navigation and Support, Multimedia and Interaction, and Discussion Forums. Navigation and support mitigating strategies include ensuring that support is available, ample, and easy to find. Navigation of the course website should not be confusing or complex, and ideally, time will be allotted at the start of a course to allow learners to orient themselves to the online space. This orientation time must be supported by the instructor through a high level of instructor presence and engagement. As shown in the literature, effective navigation and support overlap widely with the concept of presence. Instructor contact information and “office hours”, and in essence instructor availability, directly communicate to learners their presence in the class. Availability and instructor presence foster trust in learners, allowing them to feel safe about their own social presence in the class. As one result, instructors will also represent the institution in a positive way.

Multimedia and interaction mitigating strategies revealed the need for communication early on in a course, and the importance of one-to-one interaction between instructor and learner during this early phase. One-to-one interaction helps to establish learner engagement in the class and can open up channels of communication that learners will feel safe using throughout the course. Effective use of synchronous communication technology also helps bring learners into the developing community for that class and can provide intrinsic communication that learners may feel



is missing in an online environment. Learners may not actually be aware or feel comfortable at the start of a class to take initiative and contact an instructor by telephone, chat, or in person, making the use of synchronous activities all that more important. Multimedia options, such as audio, video, and graphic representations, provide choice for learners who prefer different types of media and want to extend their learning beyond the set activities of the course. Learners may also benefit from a variety of media options that are better suited for their individual schedule or lifestyle.

The discussion forums were a dominant theme in the literature, and are considered an essential component of an online class. Discussion forums provide a flexible space for learners to connect, interact, and communicate with each other through reflective, open-ended conversation. The asynchronous nature of discussion forums allows for flexibility, time, and follow-up probing throughout the conversation. They also provide a place for instructors to interact with learners. While instructors need to actively participate in discussion to model posting expectations, their presence requires a delicate balance so that they remain a part of the community, while not gravitating to the centre of it. Explicit expectations in the form of posting guidelines also communicates to learners exactly what is required of their discussion activity. Highlighting agreements and disagreements, encouraging consensus, and facilitating forum “ice breakers” are examples of potentially useful instructor presence that help ease learners into online discussion mindsets and introduce the concept of digital identity. An additional forum for “off-topic” conversation helps to lighten the information load in the required forums and provide a place for language learners to practice their language.



# DISCUSSION

## Introduction

The discussion section will look at the applied research indicators of success (as introduced in the Research Project section) and present some of the learner feedback that was collected through the project.

## Projected Indicators

One of the projected indicators of successful application of mitigating strategies was high retention rates. It is difficult to pin down retention rates in online learning – many institutions do not make this data public, and there are varying contexts that would prevent such data from being generalizable. A 2012 report compiled by the Canadian Virtual University (CVU) consortium examining online university education (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012) states that retention rates in various online courses may be as high as 77% or 85%, and that poor online retention rates are actually a reflection of the type of learner who can benefit from the increased access to courses that online delivery provides. The *Language for Work* context – a non-credit, college course for working professionals, new to Canada, studying in an ELL context – certainly would factor into retention rates. The learners who participated in this course, due to their busy working and family schedules, may not have been able to attend any class at all if it were not for the online delivery. Out of the eighteen course participants, eleven completed the course, for a percentage of 61%. The other seven participants were active in the course, but did not meet the required amount of activity to receive a “pass” grade.

The other three projected indicators are all discussed in the following section. These three indicators were:

- Anecdotal feedback that supports learner engagement and teacher presence
- High degree of learner satisfaction with course delivery, content and online experience
- Identification of online tools that encourage engagement between learners and learners, learners and instructor, and learners and content (e.g. discussion threads, instructor announcement boards, instructor feedback to individual learners as well as to the group.)

The discussion below follows the topics that were introduced in the literature review. Each topic is examined, then a mitigating strategy (or more than one) that was used in the course is detailed, and finally the feedback received from the learners through the surveys and the focus group is presented and discussed. Following the discussion is a list of recommendations, with consideration for learners who identify as ELLs, for mitigating strategies that educators may want to use in online courses.

# Course Structure & Support

## Course Structure

The research presented in the literature review shows that course structure is an important consideration in delivering an online course. A confusing and difficult to navigate course can easily lead to feelings of frustration in a learner, and eventual learner isolation. Conversely, when course structure is clear and apparent to the learner, such feelings of frustration can be avoided. It is important that a course structure have an intuitive nature; this is because learners lack a physical presence that they may be used to in face-to-face classes, where they can ask questions and receive answers immediately and simultaneously as they orient to the course (Henry & Meadows, 2008; Mabrito, 2004; Shaw & Polovina, 1999).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – ENSURE CLEAR NAVIGATION AND INCLUDE START-OF-UNIT TABLES

Before the start of the *Language for Work* course, the course structure was examined for simplicity - in particular the hierarchical relationships between modules, units, and activities were considered. Course designers thought the three levels of viewing in the course contents might cause navigation confusion among the learners because it might take several clicks to reach desired content, and because content might not always be at hand or in a familiar location. However, the structure of the course was left as is, and learner feedback was later examined. Start-of-unit tables outlined the topics for that unit, the type of activity, and the suggested time to complete the activity; this was expected to be helpful for learners to orient themselves and for clarifying the course structure.

**By the end of this unit, you will be able to:**

- discuss the complexity of your cultural identity
- identify the many cultural groups to which you belong

**In this unit, you will complete the following activities:**

Topic	Activity	Suggested Time
Learn more about your classmates	Discussion activity	60 minutes
Culture as our lens: Description, Interpretation, Evaluation	Self-paced learning activity	45 minutes
	Discussion activity	30 minutes
Exploring our cultural identity: cultural star	Self-paced learning activity	45 minutes
<b>Total suggested time</b>		<b>3 hrs</b>

## FEEDBACK

The learner feedback showed no comments about the tables, except that eight learners reported accessing the tables while two did not. Much of the feedback regarding the structure of the course had to do with navigation and the D2L platform (see next section). However, two comments illustrate the difference and variety of technical experience between learners that may be present in any given class. For the learner with experience in online learning, “the online site is easy to understand”. For the learner who is not “tech savvy”, moving from section to section appears to be frustrating.

- *In Venezuela, I took an English course online. So for me, online learning is easy and really convenient if you don't have the time to commit in a regular program. The online site is easy to understand and the content has been useful. Also, I think the modules are well designed and planned.*
- *If you are on one section and wants to explore different section, than you can't open it another Tab of browser, in general it's difficult specially those who are not tech savvy.*

A third learner commented about the weekly workload, and a desire to have content more spread out across the entire course. This is certainly a consideration for future offerings of the course, and may be a restriction on courses that are intensive (only 8 weeks long). The distribution of content throughout the course will be reexamined. A more consistent distribution of workload may alleviate any feelings of frustration for high workload weeks, and it may provide learners with an indicator that they are progressing through the course as expected.

When students feel that one week may be much more work than another, perhaps they will feel a sense that they not grasping the concepts of that week at a sufficient level.

- *Maybe like this is a personal opinion, but some units had more content than other. Sometimes I had so much work to do, during a unit, then the following unit was not easy, but less content. Maybe there we could find a balance between units*

## Central Documents and Tutorials

Central “go-to” documents supporting the navigation of a course can prevent learners from getting lost or feeling uncertain about their involvement in a course. When learners know where to access support and navigation guidance, it reduces the reliance on prior experience (which the learner may or may not have) in navigating the course with minimal difficulties. The availability of tutorials and support needs to be clearly indicated because in online environments, with the absence of intrinsic communication, it may not be evident to learners where these tutorials and support are located. The potential for learner frustration may also increase if learners feel that the interface is confusing or unfamiliar. Access to tutorials, support, and even content should be easy to find to ensure navigation troubles are not problematic from the outset (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Henry & Meadows, 2008). Clear expectations for how learners should communicate in the class and on how frequently they should communicate will help learners build social presence in the course. Learners benefit from knowing the communication expectations by being able to participate consistently, without any confusion as to what the instructor expects or what peers may expect from them (Boettcher, 2011).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – CREATE CENTRAL SUPPORT DOCUMENTS

The *Language for Work* course featured an introduction module with tutorials on how to use the D2L platform, how to use the self-paced learning activities, how to use the discussion activities, and how to use the dropbox activities. The tutorials were “centrally” located in that they were situated in the introduction module, which was accessible from all points in the content browser, and were both viewable online or downloadable. Each PDF tutorial featured screenshots, images that matched up with screen display, and clear text to guide learners through the tutorial. Instructor contact information was included at the end of each tutorial.

Acting as an additional support document, a recording of the course introductory webinar was posted in the introduction module. The course webinar was conducted twice prior to the start of the course and then posted in the introductory module before access to the course was opened. Webinars detailed the navigation information that was included in the tutorials, and gave attendees an opportunity to ask instructors questions about the course. The video was available for learner to access at any time during the course and was posted in the same location as the tutorials.

After the course had started, a discussion board rubric was also posted in the introduction forum. The rubric was added to make explicit the expectations of the discussion board activity, giving learners a set of expectations for what was required in the discussion activity. The rubric document also provided learners with suggestions on how to generate conversation and increase engagement in the discussion forums.

## FEEDBACK

In all, ten participants said that they accessed the tutorials. Eight participants accessed the discussion post rubric, and of seven participants who accessed the webinar three did so with the recorded version. Learners expressed an expectation of support in the *Language for Work* course, and one comment suggested that the tutorials not only answered any questions that they had, but also made them feel comfortable about asking further questions.

- *Expectation of support: To find answers and guidance when I feel I am stuck*
- *The support was good, I had every question answer and I felt so comfortable to ask what I felt that wasn't clear enough.*

The feedback from the *Language for Work* participants confirms the research that confusing navigation will cause frustration in learners. Learners commented about the difficulty of navigating D2L, two of them stating that it was particularly frustrating to find content on the course website.

- *Please try to make D2L easier, its complicated to find content.*
- *It's really good to learn online, however system of D2L is not easy to use, if that becomes simplify that would be great overall.*
- *Difficult to use D2L, many times I had to dig down to find where I was before moving to another section.*

As well, the dropbox assignments were of notable difficulty and frustration for the learners, despite several comments that also spoke to the usefulness of the actual assignments.

- *The dropbox part seems to be complicated to me. What is the purpose of the 'send to blinder' part? Do you receive the feedback from the interactive presentations? I mean the ones from the self-paced learning activity.*
- *The Drop Box was so essential to review the content as sometimes I had to come back and read again what I have learned. I just didn't know about the feedback at the dropbox until the end of the course.*
- *Drop Box - Useful but sometimes it confused me.*
- *I loved the assignment. I was confused at first about the fillable PDF forms. It was all over now.*
- *The content was fine. I had issues filling up the PDF documents so the quiz format worked much better for me (This is an example of the great job the facilitators did!).*
- *Simple, good and easy, however I found difficulty to sign off the assignment before uploading.*

One learner commented on the support that the webinar provided, stating that it helped make the course system easy to use. Another commenter felt that the platform (D2L) was easy enough on its own to use, without the help of any support.

- *In general, the system is really easy to use. Attending the webinar has been helpful because [the instructor] gave us all the information we have needed during the course.*
- *I've never used the support because the platform has worked perfect so far.*

## Office Hours

Instructor office hours are important to an online course because this time provides learners with the ability to receive more immediate answers to questions. Some learners may be motivated by this type of contact, and may feel that it fills the “real-time” communication gap that is often missing in online courses compared to face-to-face classes. Detailed contact information creates instructor presence in the course and can prevent learners from feelings of frustration and isolation, letting them know that synchronous communication is available and encouraged. Instructors are also seen as representatives of the institution and will often field technical or administrative questions from learners, a practice that can ultimately build trust and comfort in learners (Humphries, 2015; Krish, Hussin, & Sivapuniam, 2011; Mabrito, 2004; Boettcher, 2011).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – PROVIDE OFFICE HOURS

The *Language for Work* course did not include any set office hours. Instructors received calls from 9-5 during the day and responded to emails in a timely manner, often within the hour. Instructor contact information (emails and phone number) was displayed widely throughout the course: on the course home page, in the news announcements, in the tutorials, in the webinar, and in personal emails.

### FEEDBACK

There was a significant amount of feedback about contact with the instructors. Two comments expressed a “good feeling” and a “comfortable” feeling from the ability to interact with instructors directly.

- *Thanks for my facilitators. I always got feedback from them especially for me. It is a good feeling to have interaction with them. They always help me to improve.*
- *The support was good, I had every question answer and I felt so comfortable to ask what I felt that wasn't clear enough.*

One learner needed to be absent from the class for a significant period of time, and used instructor contact information to inform the instructors, to give updates about his progress while away (which turned out to be much less participation than he anticipated), and to inquire about “catching up” when he returned. This type of communication and comfort was enabled through instructor contact.

- *Yes, my problem is about time. I travelled to China and went home late. I have trouble catching up the course in the beginning. However, the facilitators gave me extra time, so eventually I could finish the assignments.*

Many learners commented about instructor response time in replying to emails and phone calls. Phrases like “at hand”, “responded very quickly”, and “very prompt” show the impact that a short response time has on learners. The final comment illustrates how fast response time can especially help those learners who do not have much experience with online learning.

- *The course facilitators are great. They respond me timely and considerably.*
- *The course support was excellent. Both [instructors] were very prompt in responding to my questions/concerns and always offered helpful suggestions/solutions.*

- *Teachers are excellent. They were at my hand when I need help.*
- *Course's facilitators have responded very quickly to my concerns/questions and have been very helpful. Their involvement in the posts has also been very important in keeping the communication flowing*
- *The facilitators...are considerate and assessable. They answered the questions timely.*
- *Every time I have a problem then I send a message, then like 30 minutes or 60 minutes later I had the answer. So it was very good. Especially that this was my first experience online that I could interact with the teacher. All of the courses that I had before were websites, and I just go there and study there. Now I could interact. It was a good experience for me.*

One final comment suggests that although the use of email and direct communication was used, one form of interaction is not always sufficient. The learner felt there was a need for more formal feedback regarding assignments, a component that relates more directly to course goals and outcomes compared to office hour or instructor contact interaction. The self-paced activities provided instant feedback as learners proceeded through them, while the dropbox assignments required specific instructor feedback.

- *I interact with the facilitators by email asking questions. I would like to have more return about my performance at the course, especially about the dropbox.*

## Orientation

Initial contact among learners and between learners and their instructor plays a pivotal role in establishing presence in an online course. At the start of a course learners can build rapport with each other and develop social relationships that can then build into interaction directly related to course goals and outcomes. The initial interaction among learners serves as a foundation for community in the class. Ideally, an orientation period at the start of a course provides learners with the time to interact socially, as well as to solve any technical or administrative problems. Without this time allotted for class orientation, some learners may have their progress in the course derailed from the start, resulting in discouragement and demotivation and eventual feelings of isolation (Garrison, 2007; Hammond, 2000; Salmon, 2004).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – INCLUDE AN ORIENTATION PERIOD

Because of time restrictions, an orientation week was not set up for the *Language for Work* course. There were a few adjustments made to the course in order to provide an orientation period for learners. First, the course webinars were held prior to the course, giving learners a chance to meet each other and the instructors, and to give them a chance to ask questions. As well, some of the content that was originally planned for week one was shifted to week two to allow learners more time to engage in introduction posts and to work through any login or navigation problems.

The effect of the orientation period, or lack of a longer one, is difficult to put into context. In part, this is because orientation is aimed at igniting the community building process among the various personalities and experiences. Orientation feedback is also difficult to put into context because of the multi-cultural makeup of the learner population. The variety of cultural backgrounds and educational experiences that come with a learning group comprised of newcomers to Canada requires special consideration, and allowances of both cultural and language understanding. Because of this variety, learners will bring with them into the course many different expectations. Learner expectations have a particularity prevalent presence in the feedback for this section, especially in comparing online learning and online community building to face-to-face contexts. This may represent the struggle that no matter how much consideration ELL educators give for alleviating learner isolation and bridging instructional distance in virtual environments, learners might always end up comparing their online experiences with face-to-face experiences.



## FEEDBACK

While there was not much direct feedback about the introductory tasks and the orientation time, many comments were directed at interactions with peers and classmates, and the feeling of the presence or absence of community. Although it is difficult to say, initial contact and orientation may have contributed to learner feelings. Learners expressed an expectation for interacting with and learning from classmates.

- *My expectations are to know more about appropriate/expected behaviors in a Canadian work environment. I'm looking forward to learn about my classmates*
- *Being honest, I would like to get to know more people. Networking is very important to me. Also, it is really nice to be able to know other countries by their work culture.*
- *I hope we have good interactions. We get many interesting examples from each other through discussion. So, we can learn different cultures and improve quickly.*

A significant number of comments were positive, and learners felt that their relationships with classmates were enjoyable. In this sample of comments, one learner noted that some people (whom they know of from the introduction forum) were still missing from the discussion, resulting in a sense of absence or lacking, perhaps, in the community that had been initiated. Another learner commented on the fact that the group was not as active as s/he would have liked.

- *Some of my classmates are very excellent and work hard in the course. We had wonderful interaction to learn from each other.*
- *The interactions between my classmates and me are doing well.*
- *I have been interacted replying the posts. I think that I have a good interaction.*
- *Whenever I logged in, I always learned new content from the course. Meanwhile, I also learned more from my classmates and facilitators. It is a wonderful feeling.*
- *I feel like I was part of an interesting group and with some classmates I could experience interesting conversations about the content.*
- *Yes, I did. I really enjoy to be part of my group and I will miss this kind of interaction!*
- *It's been great. The interaction has been interesting with many of my classmates. However, I could have noticed that there are still some people missing the discussion activities.*
- *This is great that classmates talk via posting on the discussions, Its sad that of us (including myself) can't be active all the time.*

Still other comments suggested that there was a sense of distance in the forums. Learners used language like “distant”, “not fluid”, and “impersonal” to describe interaction with classmates. One learner noted the distant feeling present between classmates despite the presence of respect and directness, suggesting that community goes beyond these two facets of effective communication.

- *I feel that it is very distant but I like that it is respectful and direct. I will suggest to do a change to the discussion post would be appropriate.*
- *I would like to have more interactions with the classmates, I don't feel the communication has been very fluid (at least in my group)*

- *The posts sometimes felt very impersonal, like people were saying what they thought they were expected to say rather than giving a personal opinion and offering different perspectives based on their own experience/culture.*

Another learner reported a certain level of discomfort in approaching classmates, and a worry about being misunderstood. This supports the need for a certain level of a social relationship between classmates in order for learners to feel comfortable enough to take discussion to a deeper level.

- *There were many times where I wanted to ask questions from the classmates because either I did not quite understand something, or wanted to disagree with the way they were explaining a concept but I opt to not do it for fear of being misunderstood.*

One learner noted the difference between online and “in person” community building, highlighting one of the major challenges of building communities in online courses and through asynchronous communication. Another comment noted the difference between online and face-to-face communities, and the difference in expectations that may exist.

- *I did not feel there was a sense of community among the classmates. Maybe because, again, that's something that's best accomplished in person.*
- *It is my first experience in an on-line course and I feel our relationship is cold. I believe that is the way it works.*

Learner expectations of online community may extend into spaces like social media and beyond the course, as shown in the next comment. What may be active online participation for some may also be a very small, less active online group for others who spend a more significant time in virtual communities. In these cases, orientation time may have more or a less of effect on an individual, and may even need to focus on orientating people to the dynamics and expectations of a smaller online space than they are accustomed to.

- *There is no community, forum or even face book page where students can interact even after completion of course.*

A final comment shows the frustration that can develop in a learner when they feel their effort and interaction is not reciprocated. Whether more time devoted to orientation would have helped this particular learner is unclear; however, the research says that orientation time at the start of the course will often lead to stronger sense of community, where communication would be more readily reciprocated. The positive comments at the start of this section show that learners may have an expectation to connect with classmates and build community – online spaces are a richly interactive place for community to grow, making the actions of the instructor all the more important.

- *To be honest it has been low. I started the course with a higher expectations and it has been decreasing for many reasons. First at all I have been very busy; however, I have worked hard and I have been responsible with my assigned tasks. Secondly, I have noticed that people do not participated into the platform timely, and additionally I do not have or manage the total availability of them, despite I got the compromise to invest 6 to 7 hours per week (my availability is just from Monday to Thursday night). Finally, I feel I am not learning or practice as I thought English Language during this time, because as I mentioned before I need to interact more with others and measure the progress.*

# Multimedia & Communication

## Initial and One-to-One Communication

Initial instructor contact with learners also plays a pivotal role in establishing relationships and presence in the course. As mentioned in the previous section on orientation, at the start of a course learners can build rapport and develop social relationships that can then build into interaction directly related to course goals and outcomes. This initial and one-to-one contact largely exists outside of the specific design for a course, relating closely to instructor presence and support. One-to-one contact with the instructor may help to motivate learners, may make learners feel comfortable in the course, and may communicate to learners that direct contact with instructors is explicitly included and available in the course (Garrison, 2007; Hammond, 2000; Mairto, 2004).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – MAKE INITIAL CONTACT WITH LEARNERS

As one of the side effects of the screening process for the research project, all learners in the course were contacted by a facilitator prior to the course both by email and by telephone. Each telephone call lasted approximately 15 minutes and included personal discussion revolving around issues such as learning goals, career goals, personal schedule, and length of time in Canada. Additionally, a start of course email was sent out to all of the learners, and replies were responded to individually. Learners who did not appear active in posting introductions, in filling out their personal profile, and in logging into the course were also contacted individually by email or telephone.

### FEEDBACK

Learners commented on the open channel that was available for one-to-one interaction, suggesting that they felt supported (“Teacher is always on your side”), respected (“clear and friendly communication”), and valuable compared to a self-paced, non-facilitated course. The last comment shows a desire for a Canadian perspective on discussion.

- *Teacher is always on your side when you need them.*
- *Having an open channel with the facilitators and a clear and friendly communication.*
- *I honestly thought that the course was going to be more like self-learning course, but you guys [facilitators] were there all the time. I felt like your support and your help, I'm really grateful for.*
- *I expect that instructors can give us feedback in every discussion activity. As we are all immigrants, it is important to have a Canadian point of view as a reference.*

Learners also overwhelmingly expressed interest in explicit language feedback. Again, the instructor was seen as a type of authority figure, not of Canadian culture this time, but of English language. There was a desire on the part of the learners to receive language practice and instruction.

- *Give me advices about my English skill.*
- *Higher expectations, I would like that you to correct the tasks, review the different text I wrote in order to know if I have grammar mistakes, etc.*
- *I would like to have more interaction with the instructor in order to practice more the speaking and the listening skills.*
- *My expectations is the facilitator interact with the group, specially in a discussion. I expect that they correct our mistakes in the writing also.*

- *In fact, this course is difficult to me because the lack of my English skills. I always find lots of words I don't know by using a dictionary. However, when I finish this course successfully, I believe my English skill will be better than now.*
- *I expect improve my vocabulary, understand Canadian culture at work, learn how to ask and answer properly while talking with boss and co-workers, learn how to answer properly interview question. I really hope this course would help me in my future interviews.*
- *I know I have grammar and spelling problems, I know it is too much to ask but I would like to be corrected and have a feedback about it.*

### **MITIGATING STRATEGY – PROVIDE INDIVIDUALIZED FEEDBACK ON LEARNER ASSIGNMENTS**

The one instance of one-to-one contact directly related to content in the course was the feedback that was given for each dropbox assignment submitted through the D2L platform. Learners downloaded a fillable PDF with a series of confirmation and reflection style questions. After they answered the questions, learners then sent the PDF documents through a D2L “dropbox” where only an instructor could view the document. In space provided inside D2L, instructors added feedback and comments that only the submitting learner could view. Feedback and comments included important content information that may have been missed, thought provoking questions, and some language corrections where mistakes seemed overly erroneous and repetitive. Learners were also invited to follow up on the feedback.

### **FEEDBACK**

As noted earlier (see Tutorials) the dropbox activity created some navigation and interface confusion. There was also positive feedback about the dropbox assignments and the associated one-to-one interaction and feedback. One comment notes the difference between emails and the dropbox interaction, expressing a desire for more of the latter as it relates more directly to “performance”. Another learner comments on the professionalism that the dropbox interaction with the instructor adds to the course. The final comment speaks to the importance of the practical aspects of having direct language feedback from the instructor.

- *These assignments are easy to follow up. Thanks for feedback.*
- *I interact with the facilitators by email asking questions. I would like to have more return about my performance at the course, specially about the dropbox.*
- *Drop Box Assignments It suits online learning styles. It makes the online course more convenience and professional.*
- *It was very good to see the feedback, I think I really learned and I can use it daily in my work and with people. I really had some difficulties about my grammar. I think It's very important about the feedback in the dropbox, I could see what I'm writing wrong and the expressions that I can change.*

## **Synchronous Communication**

Online learning offers effective opportunities for active, synchronous learning. Synchronous components in an online course can help facilitate the growth of communities, in that they will counter the inherent distance and isolation that may come with predominantly asynchronous communication. Instructors and learners both are able to experience the natural and intuitive feedback of real-time communication and physical movement through synchronous communication. Synchronous communication may help learners feel more “part of the group” rather than outside of it, whether any group is perceived or real (McInnery & Roberts, 2004; Mourad, Tarik & Pascal, 2015; Wang & Newlin, 2001; Wegerif, 1998).

## MITIGATING STRATEGY – INCORPORATE WEBINARS OR OTHER SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES

Much of the synchronous communication in the *Language for Work* course came in the form of instructor contact and one-to-one student to instructor communication (see initial and one-to-one communication above). One specific planned element that brought synchronous communication to the *Language for Work* class was the addition of the webinars at the start of the course. The webinars were hosted twice prior to the start of the course and were not mandatory – at least seven learners attended the webinars in real-time. The webinars, each one hosted by a course instructor, presented similar content, outlining an introduction to the D2L platform and outlining the course navigation tutorials. Learners were encouraged to use the chat box (for text) and to use their microphones and web cameras.

## FEEDBACK

There was only one learner comment that mentioned the webinar specifically, and although positive, the lack of comments may suggest that the course needs more synchronous communication, especially throughout the course as it relates directly to goals and outcomes.

- *Attending the webinar has been helpful because [the instructor] gave us all the information we have needed during the course.*

Learners expressed a desire for synchronous communication, often noting the difference between online and face-to-face communication.

- *It could be nice if we have a phone call. It may keep alive the relationship.*
- *Also I was wondering if we are having a video chat meeting with the classmates or designed group.*
- *Maybe a mix format would work. You can do the self-paced activities and dropbox assignments on your own and meet once per week for an hour to discuss the weeks' topic in a guided panel.*
- *One thing I am not satisfied, a lot of situation I would like to talk face to face. This is a drawback of the online course.*

Two commenters also noted that the difference between online and face-to-face interaction is especially significant for English language learning and for practicing cultural communication. A predominantly asynchronous environment does not always provide the space needed to practice cultural strategies, to practice tone and intonation, and to build relationships in a “face to name” type of way.

- *I understand this is an online course, but I think we could benefit from having a personal interaction at least once or twice during the course. Sometimes it's easier to communicate in person, and once everybody can put a face to the names on the group the communications might be more fluid. Also, because this course is about learning to interact according to the Canadian culture, we could have a space to meet and practice strategies we learned*
- *I understand the online format is very convenient when you have a busy schedule, but I found the discussion parts to be hard to do in written. We were learning ways to communicate in culture sensitive way, the tone and intonation are very important, and you can't practice those in a written format*

Another learner comments that they were “shy” about writing text, perhaps an indication that a necessary comfort level or “insider” perception had not been reached. The same learner does note the “leaned down” nature of online text and communication.

- *We could benefit from personal interaction. I was shy on saying certain things, because I wasn't sure about how it would be read.*

The final commenter made the connection directly to community, comparing the online community in this class (or lack of) to in-person communities present in church or volunteer work. Depending on online experience and degree of immersion, some learners may always compare

the development of an online community online to a face-to-face one, affecting their expectations when learning online.

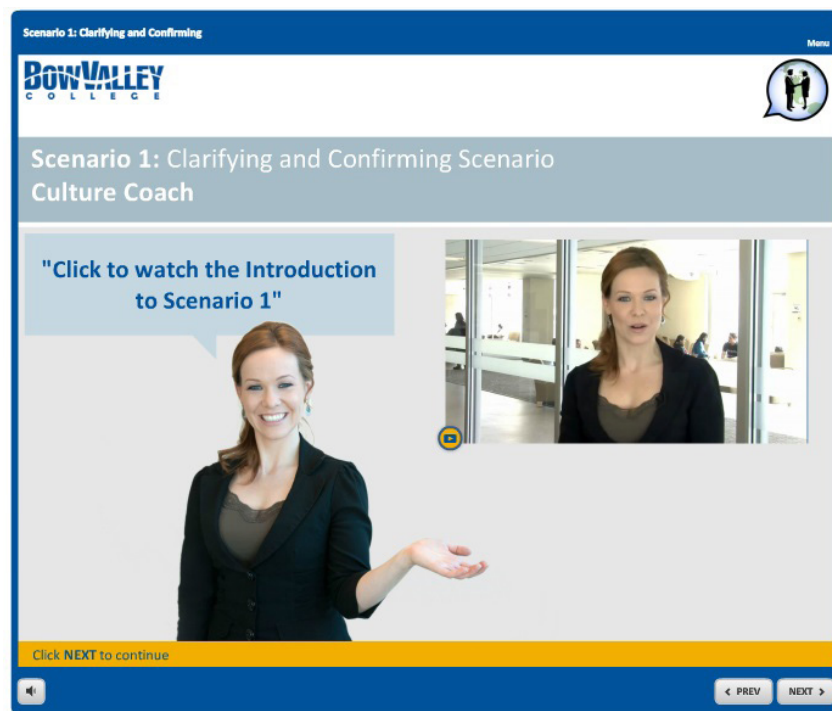
- *Online or face to face, whenever if we can get together occasionally, it would be better, like a sense of community, like when we do volunteer or go to church or something. I have a feeling like a sense of community. But I would like to say that online course a lot of situation we use language not oral language, in that case sense of community is not so strong.*

## Diverse Media

Elements of the course also benefit from multi-media diversity. Multiple channels for communicating and accessing content will provide options to a group of learners who have a variety of preferences for communication, and who also hold a variety of prior experience and familiarity with different types of technology. Diverse media can also highlight supplemental material, for learners who want to extend their learning beyond the set content for the course. Media creation will always have the restrictions of planning time and designer skill, as well (Mabrito, 2004).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – INCLUDE MULTIMEDIA IN THE DESIGN OF CONTENT

The *Language for Work* course featured several multi-media components in its delivery. The self-paced activities contain text, videos, dialog matching exercises, drag and drop exercises, and various other interactive exercises usually built around a work-related conversation or situation involving several conversations. Multi-media was used to progress learners through these scenarios, and included the presence of a “culture coach” host to tie content together and give it a visual narrative.



A few additional videos were used throughout the modules and discussion activities to highlight content – for example a video of well-known speaker on multi-cultural workplace issues was posted to highlight the importance of soft skills for newcomers to Canada.

### FEEDBACK

The self-paced activities were well received. A few comments pertained to the use of media in these activities, linking media to a better “understanding of the content” and stating that overall, the self-paced activities “illustrate” the content. Similarly, the word “show” was used

to describe how media relates to content; this suggests that the visual affordances of certain media match the visual dynamic of language and cultural communication, making them suitable for these activities based around cultural communication and workplace conversation.

- The videos were so helpful to show example about how that content could be practice. I think they are essential for the course, to help the understanding of the content.
- It's good! I find the self-paced material the most interesting, as they give a lot of information and you can digest the material at your convenience and at your preferred time!
- The self-paced learning activities are very useful to illustrate the concepts and strategies.

Learners showed an expectation and preference for video media. Some comments mention how the video matched content well, while another mentions that one of the supplemental videos in the course is “entertaining”.

- *[I expect the] use of more and more videos*
- *I would advise to add some more videos based on some real time scenario, ones added were also useful.*
- *The videos are well designed and match the modules.*
- *Course Videos are very effective to help us understand course content. I am very glad to have these videos in our course.*
- *The videos were very good. I particularly liked the Lionel Laroche videos as they are not only informative but also very entertaining.*

Another comment, indicating the learner’s desire for more video to supplement learning, supports the research that suggests multimedia can be used effectively to extend learning beyond the course content.

- Maybe we can add some reference video links for students who have time to watch.

This final comment shows that videos may not be suitable for all types of learners, as this commenter does not feel the videos were useful. Perhaps text, graphics, or audio that includes the same content needs to be delivered alongside video, to provide more options for learners.

- *The course is great. But I don't think the videos are helpful enough to give me more useful information.*

## **MITIGATING STRATEGY – CREATE WEEKLY UPDATE VIDEOS**

The course also featured update videos from the instructors. Videos of the two course facilitators talking on screen about the course were recorded each week. The commentary consisted of text that accompanied and summarized the videos. In these commentaries and videos, the facilitators addressed any technical problems with the course, outlined some of the more relevant discussion from the previous weeks, outlined course content for the upcoming week, and discussed course concepts that may have been or were anticipated to be confusing for the participants. At times, the facilitators in the videos also tried to motivate participants to keep up to date with their required course work.

## **FEEDBACK**

Learners generally responded positively to the weekly instructor videos. The first two comments below speak to the presence of the instructors and the “personal” feeling that the weekly news videos created.

- *I personally think the videos the instructors sometimes post are great. As this is an online learning, we could have zero opportunity to see out instructors. Now at least we know what they look like!*



- *It was nice to have that once a week, it's a little more personal than just the written information.*

Another comment shows the flexibility that comes with the video format in that learners can review the video at their own leisure, while at the same time experiencing interactions with the instructors.

- *Wonderful!! The facilitators are pretty good and helpful. If I have some questions I don't understand, I can do back to view the video again.*

The final comments are also very positive. The last two learner comments point out that these videos help to clarify the content for the week ahead and provide a “big picture” perspective on the course.

- *Until now, everything is wonderful. There are introductions, weekly feedback video, responds to our discussions. I can get all information easily and quickly from our two facilitators.*
- *The video are excellent, you use a lot of video to talk about some conflict and making suggestion.*
- *They have clear idea about this course. The wonderful thing is that they give weekly feedback and introduction video.*
- *Weekly videos provided a big picture for each week.*

## Discussion Forum

### Benefits of Discussion Forums

Discussion forums are a common and an essential part of online courses. They provide a space for learners to build social relationships and to develop community. They also provide learners with the ability to comment when it suits their schedule, allowing for reflection within and between discussions. The flexibility and reflective use of discussion forums do need to be moderated by instructors with well-planned activities that promote reflection in learners and promote a deeper consideration of content. Discussion boards that come with the ability to flag new posts may have both positive and negative effects on discussion: notifications are convenient for learners and can help to build discussion around new posts; conversely, notifications may put existing discussion into the background (Fujioka-Ito, 2013; Lomicka and Lord, 2007; Strømman, 2015; Hillen, 2014; Hewitt, 2005; Morrison, 2013).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – INCLUDE DISCUSSION FORUMS

The *Language for Work* course included a significant number of discussion forum activities – there were twenty-three discussion activities, with about three or four per week. The discussion forum used was built into the D2L platform and gave learners the ability to easily check which posts had new replies. Notifications for new topics and response posts were also available for learners, so they could receive a message when someone replied to them.

### FEEDBACK

Most of the feedback that learners provided about discussion forums was in context of another aspect of the course. Much of it overlaps with (and is discussed in) the orientation section (see above) and with the finer details of discussion forum facilitation and discussion forum instructor presence (see below). Comments generally support the research that discussion forums are a welcome, if not expected, aspect of online learning. Learners expect to be able to interact with their peers, and to gain understanding about course content through peer perspectives and examples.



Based on the comments below, discussion forums appear to be particularly relevant in multicultural classes, where learners expressed a strong desire to learn from people with different backgrounds and from different countries.

- *I can understand the peer's thoughts from many countries. They also don't know about the Canadian culture, so we can help each other to understand.*
- *I hope we have good interactions. We get many interesting examples from each other through discussion. So, we can learn different cultures and improve quickly.*
- *Being honest, I would like to get to know more people. Networking is very important to me. Also, it is really nice to be able to know other countries by their work culture.*
- *I learned lots of things from classmates by reading their discussion.*
- *I also liked the forums, especially because it was between people from different cultures and different experiences working here in Canada. I learned a lot with my colleagues experience.*
- *We can learn from each other and the instructors. This is a reflective learning place, and this place makes us integrate our new knowledge and skills with our experiences, and then becomes a part of our knowledge*
- *.If I submitted my comments, I always got feedback from my group members. They are very nice.*
- *My post are all read and commented by my group and by [the instructor].*

As shown in the orientation section, several learners were dissatisfied with the activity on the discussion forum. While this might be the result of an insufficient orientation to the class, here we consider that it may also be a result of the discussion forum questions, posting requirements, and/or discussion forum group sizes. Two learners commented on the time that it takes to post and respond to other posts, suggesting that there may be too many posts required of the learners. However, this may also be a factor of balance between other activities in the course and the discussion activities. Or, it may just be the plight of the working student with a family to support, requiring special consideration in how the discussion forums are facilitated (see facilitating discussion forums below)

- *This is great that class mates talk via posting on the discussions, its sad that of us (including myself) can't be active all the time.*
- *I think these parts need to improve. I knew most students are too busy to discuss. We need them to take part in discussion. However, I have no a good idea.*

One learner commented on the notification system for the discussion boards, comparing it to "WhatsApp" a texting application used in less-formal situations, with more frequent and smaller sized messages. This may be evidence of the different prior experience that learners bring with them to the online class. Not only will a lack of online learning experience affect their participation in a course, but also the type of experiences they have had and are used to will set their expectations for how to communicate in an online class.

- *I feel that interaction is very distant but I like that It is respectful and direct. I will suggest to do a change to the discussion post would be appropriate. I am a user of "Whatup", an android application, and I like the way that you can easily catch up into any conversation.*

A few other learners commented about a lack of interaction, or an impersonal feel to the interaction on the discussion boards.

- *I found the discussion forums to not flow very well, despite [the instructors'] wonderful efforts. I found that there were not enough interactions among the classmates to foster the discussion. The posts sometimes felt very impersonal, like people were saying what they thought they were expected to say rather than giving a personal opinion and offering different perspectives based on their own experience/culture.*
- *I would like to have more interactions with the classmates, I don't feel the communication has been very fluid (at least in my group)*
- *In my team just 2 persons are active, and I would love to see others input as well.*

## Facilitating Discussion Forums

Discussion forums need to be moderated by instructors to ensure that discussion continues to flourish and stays on topic, and so that learners do not feel frustrated, lost, or abandoned. Flexibility is a useful quality to include when facilitating discussion forums – discussion forums suit open-ended questions and follow-up probing, which can promote deeper conversation around course outcomes and among learners. Learners will also benefit from staggered posting requirements and deadlines, allowing them to fit discussion activity into their own schedule. Guidelines not only for posting deadlines and frequency, but also for expectations about length and content, should be posted clearly in the course and made explicit to learners. Certain types of posts may more often result in stagnated discussion - avoiding an abundance of questions, summary posts, “personal salutation” posts, agreements, threatening or aggressive posts, superficial comments, and off-topic discussion may help to keep discussion flowing (Boettcher, 2011; Garrison, 2007; Hammond, 2000; Hewitt, 2005; Strømman, 2015).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – CLEARLY STATE POSTING REQUIREMENTS

Learners in the *Language for Work* course were required to make one initial post and two response posts for each of the twenty-three discussion activities in the course. A rubric was posted in the introduction module to outline posting requirements and discussion strategies (see Tutorials above). Learners were also given nine days to complete their posts for that week, with the idea that many participants in the course were working parents and that the extra few days (longer than a week) would give them time to post and respond through the weekend. None of the learners were participating in the course in their first language, thus this extended period also gave learners extra time that they might need based on their own language proficiency – not only for discussion postings, but for all activities in the course.

### FEEDBACK

Learners commented that the posting and response requirements felt restrictive, forced, and resulted in unreciprocated communication. The posting requirements stated that the two response posts were not required if not applicable (a few discussion activities did not suit itself to response posts); however, based on the first comment below, this discretion may need to be made more explicitly in the course. One commenter noted that s/he wanted to comment in a different group, and while this was not a restriction either, perhaps the ability to post in other groups needs to be made more explicit also.

While learners specifically mentioned the posting restrictions in only these three instances, it should be noted that overall, feedback about the discussion forums was positive, as stated at the start of this discussion forum section.

- *I found the requirement of having 2 responses to your classmates' post beside your own post difficult to abide by. There were some items where there was really not much room for interpretation or discussion.*
- *Posting 2 comments in your group felt forced to me and I could not do it in many of them. Having the groups separated probably didn't help as sometimes the things I wanted to comment on were in a different group.*

- *Very bad. According to our course, I will post at least 1 initial post and at least 2 follow up posts. I am the only person who posted but no body answered.*

## Instructor Presence in Discussion Forums

The discussion forum also serves as a place for instructors to interact with learners as a group and to develop their presence as a member of the community. Instructors have the ability to highlight communication and content that may be lacking in the discussion or of particular importance, and can post in discussions to note agreements and disagreements, to encourage the class to build consensus, and to recognize learners' contributions. Instructors will even act as models for how to participate in the forums. Facilitating the discussion forums is seen as a fine balance between maintaining presence and keeping discussion flourishing on the one hand, and instructors becoming dominant and gravitating to the centre of discussion. The latter may play a role in causing discussion activity to stagnate. Initial discussion forum activities may help orient learners to online discussion and provoke a mindset for asynchronous communication (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Heath, 2004; Hewitt, 2005; Mabrito, 2004; Rovai, 2007; Shea, Frederickson, Pickett, & Pelz, 2004; Strømman, 2015).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – ENSURE ACTIVE INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE IN DISCUSSION FORUMS

The instructors in the course had an informal plan to post in the discussion board only sparingly, to highlight major points, to encourage more discussion when activity was low, and to summarize salient conversation. Instructors wanted to focus more of their time on the one-to-one interaction with learners and on the weekly news. However, as the class progressed, instructors did post more often than intended in an effort to encourage more posts and to model discussion strategies such as follow-up probing and open-ended questioning. An initial introduction forum was included in the course, with a series of light questions related to learners' arrival in Canada, their work, and the origins of their name. (See Appendix E - Introduction Follow-Up Forum Questions) A follow-up discussion activity was also included in the second unit of the course, where learners needed to explore the answers in the introduction forum and post answers to questions about their classmates (See Appendix F - Introduction Follow-Up Forum Questions).

### FEEDBACK

Two learner comments showed expectations of high instructor presence in the discussion forums, suggesting a desire for instructors to be explicit about correction, to motivate, and to spark debate.

- *[I expect the facilitators to] adjust my incorrect thoughts and encourage me to work better.*
- *It shows that the facilitators are very well prepared. But I feel that it can be stronger. For example a facilitator could jump into the discussion and make a call to start a debate.*

Another learner compared online facilitation to a face-to-face environment, appearing to indicate that the latter can be replicated online.

- *In our topic discussion [the instructors] always give us feedback. In some topic, maybe we need to give more deep discussion, and [the instructors] will give us some more question or introduce a topic to discuss again. So it's a feeling that our 2 facilitators are just like face to face facilitators.*

The fourth comment is a little more indirect, but shows an expectation for a significant "Canadian" presence in the discussion surrounding the content.

- *Good as far as personal experience is concerned of home country, however if included Canadian culture based on the perception of students after reviewing videos or content would be value added and that will also open some new venue for discussion, hence at the end of day hard core understand will develop.*

The next commenter stated that s/he would like more control over the notifications for the discussion boards. The control over the notifications that the commenter describes is available, and perhaps needs to be made more explicit at the start of the course.

- *I only have a problem when I check the replays. I would like to have the option to mark the ones I already checked and respond. It is easy skip or forgot to replay. Personally, after finishing I checked twice all the replays to make sure I respond or at least I read the content.*

The final two comments acknowledged the effort made by the instructors to facilitate discussion – one possibly meaning that their efforts were motivating in that they encouraged learners to post more; the other, that instructor presence was too central to allow for discussion to flow.

- *Two facilitators always give us more suggestions and introductions. Thanks for their efforts.*
- *The online facilitation was great as well. [The instructors] did their best to keep the communication flowing, which did not seem to be an easy task.*

## Discussion Group Size

Smaller discussion forum groups may produce more meaningful discussion in active discussion forums, limiting the volume of messages that each learner will need to read. In smaller groups, learners may feel motivated to post more often because their contributions play a larger, more relevant role to the discussion (Hammond, 2000).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – CREATE SMALLER GROUPS TO ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

Initially, in the *Language for Work* course, learners were divided into 4 discussion groups of either 5 or 6 people each. Learners were made aware in each group's thread's first post that "You are free to read other threads and post in other threads; however, your 1 post and 2 response requirements will only be counted in this thread". By Module Three, the groups had been rearranged so that the active course participants were in one of two groups, and participants who were rarely checking in with the course were in another group. By the end of the course, there were only two groups of 6 and 10. Group sizes were initially meant to stay small; however, facilitators needed to adapt as the course progressed to try to keep discussion at an engaging level. The size of the group was relative to how much learners were posting and responding.

### FEEDBACK

One commenter noted the importance of being able to adapt groups as the course progresses. As an extension of instructor presence, the learner was satisfied that the support offered by the instructors provided a remedy to their discussion board frustration.

- *I think my expectations about support have been satisfied. Our instructors are always willing to help when there is a problem. For example, my group mates haven't posted yet and I had no people to interact with, and they changed me to another group.*

Another learner suggested that group membership be rotated as a rule, regardless of interaction frequency, in order to be able to meet and interact with more classmates.

- *I like it was divided by groups, but I rarely check other groups rather than mine (in my case it is a question of time). I will suggest rotating the people in the groups.*

The last two comments communicate a sense of satisfaction and even a "sense of community" and "good feeling" from the group discussions. The small size of the groups and the presence of "more discussion" may have played a factor in producing such feelings.

- *At the end of the course I felt like I knew those people because I was interacting with them for 8 weeks. Maybe because it was a small group, and maybe that was the main idea of having little groups instead of a big group, to have that sense of community. I don't know, but we were only 7 people, so we were a community.*
- *Because we had more discussion in our group, so I received more feedback from our group members. So, we learn from each other and I think it's a good feeling.*

## Additional Discussion Forum

Additionally, a separate “lobby” or separate “social” discussion board is useful for providing space for learners to interact with each other and ask questions. The presence of an additional forum can work towards building social ties among learners and instructors, and provide another outlet for peer or instructor support where learners can ask questions. An additional forum can also lighten the number of posts and information on formal discussion boards, keeping them on-topic because learners have a place for side or “spill-off” conversation. In classes where language learning is a goal (either a primary or secondary one), discussion forums act as an additional space for learning and practicing language. Learners are provided with a space where they can use language relevant to the course, and receive in-context feedback. Ideally, a course conference room will also provide learners with the ability to use audio and video for chat sessions or group work (Heath, 2004; Hillen, 2014; Rovai, 2007; Humphries, 2015; Krish, Hussin, & Sivapuniam, 2011).

### MITIGATING STRATEGY – INCLUDE FORUMS FOR GENERAL QUESTIONS

The introduction discussion forum in the Introduction Module of the *Language for Work* course was also designated for “general questions” and side conversation, with the forum heading: Use this forum if you have any general questions or comments about the course, or if you want to post any links or start any ‘side discussions’ related to the course.

While this General Questions and Introduction Forum drew forty-nine messages (third most of any forum in the course) all of them were related to introductions. No one in the class seemed to use the forum for any “off-topic” questions or side-conversation.

### FEEDBACK

Not surprisingly, there was not any feedback about the additional forum. One learner did comment about having more pedagogical connection between content and the English language. This may be a place where the additional forum could be used by instructors to highlight and start discussion about English language practice, advice, tendencies, etc. related to course content. This would also serve to satisfy the demand for more explicit language instruction and feedback, as noted in the “Initial and one-to-one instruction” section earlier.

- *[Content] is good, but I suggest more interaction and pedagogic methodology in order to know which rules or topic of the English language methodology are involve into the topic we are discussing and also measure in terms of progress.*

## Recommendations

The literature review and the feedback from the *Language for Work* course applied research suggest that successful online ELL courses are achievable. Several recommendations come out of this report. These recommendations are based on the context of the *Language for Work* course and are intended to apply to similar projects with consideration for learners who identify as ELLs. These recommendations are not ranked or in any specific order.

### Simple Course Navigation

The structure of an online ELL course (modules and units) needs to remain as simple as the content will allow. This will reduce the number of pages that learners need to navigate to access course content as well as the number of different perspectives that learners will have of the course layout. Content will be more accessible.

### Unit or Module Tables

The presence of tables at the start of units or modules (depending where is most suitable for the course) will act as signposts for learners, providing them with information, expectations, and requirements about the upcoming unit or module. Start-of-unit tables help to off-set confusion and frustration related to platform navigation.

### Centrally Located Support Documents

Include support documents in a central location. Support documents need to include explicit instruction on navigating the platform/LMS, using the finer tools of the platform/LMS, summary of class requirements (i.e. for discussion forums or hand-in assignments – see discussion forum requirements below), and a detailed course outline or syllabus. Instructors should refer to and link to these documents frequently throughout the course, and do so in various locations (discussion forum, weekly news, email). As well, in language learning related courses the support documents need to be created with consideration for ELL users.

### Timely Feedback

Learners should receive feedback on course activities promptly. For the self-paced activities, feedback was built into the activity. For the hand-in assignments, deadlines and feedback times were made explicit and learners were given instructor feedback by the deadline date.

### Timely Support

The Language for Work course instructors received a significant amount of positive feedback regarding the quick response time to learner inquiries. A mindset of “instant feedback” for responding to learners can increase the level of instructor presence in the course, strengthening the relationship between instructor and learner. Of course, quick response time is a difficult aspect of course facilitation to manage from an administrative and logistical perspective – rather than putting the burden on instructors to respond quickly to learners at different times, administrations can look at institutional infrastructure to see in what ways support can be provided and in what ways instructor roles can be shared.

## Posting Office Hours

In the event that instructors cannot respond with an “instant feedback” mindset, facilitators should try to respond to learners within one business day. Set office hours can be maintained two to three times a week for a course. Office hours and contact information should be posted throughout the course frequently and in various locations. Contact information needs to include various means of contacting instructors, such as telephone, email, LMS emails, texting, and virtual conference rooms, for example.

## Administration and Technical Support

Instructors need to be prepared to field technical questions and other questions related to the institution as a whole. This does not mean that instructors need to know all information related to the institution; however, they should know where to find it and respond with accurate and detailed information.

## Orientation Period

An orientation period should be added to the start of the course, to let learners orient themselves to the course platform, solve any technical issues, and to begin building social relationships that can lead to community. There may be restrictions preventing a significant period of orientation at the start of the course – in this case, introductory and social “getting to know you” activities should be included in the first week of the course.

## Introduction Webinar

Learners and instructors can meet together, either online in real-time or face-to-face, at the beginning of the course. Start of class webinars can double (when recordings are posted in the class) as support videos that learners can access throughout the course.

## Ample Real-Time Interaction

Although the *Language for Work* course did not feature any scheduled synchronous meetings throughout the course (such as conference calls, webinars, and face-to-face meetings), based on the feedback there seems to be a demand for either face-to-face meetings or synchronous online meetings throughout the course. These meetings can provide a place for learners to practice course related language and cultural strategies, focusing either on a specific language point from the content or on a language point that emerges from the discussion forum.

## Establish Initial Contact with Learners

Instructors need to connect with learners individually at the start of the course. This can be done by email, however a phone call will communicate to learners that synchronous channels of communication are open in the course and the instructor is available for real-time support. Continued contact throughout the course is an effective way to balance a moderate presence in the discussion forums – instructions do not need to risk dominating the discussion board if they are utilizing other forms of interaction, as established by initial contact with learners.

## Variety of Multi-Media (Video media)

A variety of media should be used in delivering course content and an ample number of interactive activities should be included in the course design. Content can be presented in various ways in a variety of media to meet different learning styles. Video is especially useful when it is used to convey some of the visual and tonal aspects of language use and cultural communication, which learners cannot experience through text alone.

## Weekly Updates

Weekly updates need to be posted by instructors, highlighting salient discussion from the forums, pointing out technical difficulties in the course, and giving learners an overview of the week ahead. If possible, the updates should be posted in video or audio media. Video format can increase instructor presence and contribute to a sense of connection with the learners, as well as contribute to the variety of media offered in the course.

## Discussion Forum

Discussion forums need to be included in the class. Discussion forum questions can include open-ended, reflection style questions for learners to discuss.

## Balanced Discussion Forum Facilitation Strategy

Instructors need to form a strategy for facilitating the discussion forum, striving to strike a balance between contributing to discussion while not dominating it. In culture and language related courses, instructors should contribute a “Canadian perspective” to the discussion, if they are in a position to do so. Instructors need to also play the role of motivator when discussion stalls, by posting more frequently in the forums or by contacting learners individually.

## Ample One-to-One Communication

Interaction with learners outside of the discussion forum can provide the balance between dominating discussion and contributing to it. Email, phone, course feedback functions, and online conferencing software should be used extensively to communicate with learners and provide instructor presence with respect to the course as a whole. Communication and discussion takes place across the whole course, not just in the discussion forum.

## Explicit Discussion Forum Requirements

Discussion forum posting requirements and deadlines need to be made explicit in the course and referred to often. A rubric detailing discussion forum requirements, with examples of discussion posts and suggestions for creating engagement, needs to be included in the central support documents.



## Malleable Discussion Group Size

Learners should be divided into discussion forum groups where it is thought that smaller groups may result in more discussion or more manageable discussion. Group sizes should be adjusted accordingly as the course progresses and discussion is either too much or too little in any particular group.

## Availability of Additional Forum

An additional forum can be made available for learners to use for general questions and conversation. Instructors can also use the forum to point out language related to course content, and to generate discussion around language specific to the course content.



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# Appendix A – Screening Assessment

## Screening Assessment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ Referred by: \_\_\_\_\_

### Preamble:

This is a research project that focuses on the course *Language for Work*. The goal of *Language for Work* is to help learners understand how culture and language affect communication in the Canadian workplace. The course aims to help learners develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC is a combination of awareness, knowledge and skill needed to interact effectively and appropriately within a language and cultural context different from your own. Language functions are integrated with cultural understandings throughout the course. You will be participating in the pilot of the course, or the trial run, and will be asked to give us feedback about the course.

The course will be delivered online, making it accessible 24 hours a day. It includes self-paced online learning activities, video scenarios, online discussion forums, online assignments and webinars. There will be assignments to complete and submit electronically and discussion postings to complete each week. Once you enroll in the course, you are expected to complete all of these assignments and discussion postings. A certificate of participation will be given to the learners who complete the course, including all assignments and discussion activities. You must complete all assignments to receive this certificate.

### Initial interview questions:

This course is part of a research project we are conducting at Bow Valley College about how to make learning online effective for second language learners. We will be asking you for feedback about your online learning experience.

- This project involves applied research. Are you willing to participate in a research project and share your feedback?  yes  no
- Your feedback will be anonymous, but it will be shared as part of the research project. Are you willing to let us share your feedback?  yes  no
- Are you willing to provide feedback about the course and the learning experience at several points in the course and after the course has finished?  yes  no

We are looking for participants who can benefit from learning about culture and language in the Canadian workplace, are interested in trying an online course and are willing to reflect and share feedback with us so that we can make the course and other online learning opportunities effective for second language learners. We would like you to be sure that you can commit to the time and effort that this course requires.

- Are you able to spend five to seven hours a week on the course for eight weeks?  yes  no
- When will you be able to work on the course (what days, evenings, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel comfortable using computers?  yes  no

- This course requires that you have a computer and high speed Internet (connected by wire, not Wi-Fi) that you can access regularly to complete the coursework.
- There are several video elements to this course; you will also need access to speakers or headphones.
- Additionally, you will need to use an updated version of a major browser (Internet Explorer, Google Chrome, or Firefox).
- Do you meet the above technical requirements? yes no

#### Language Level

- Do you have a Canadian Language Benchmark of 6 or higher?  yes  no
- CLBs L\_\_\_\_\_ S\_\_\_\_\_ R\_\_\_\_\_ W\_\_\_\_\_
- If you do not have CLBs, how often do you interact in English in a typical day? \_\_\_\_\_
- Have you taken any courses since your arrival to Canada? If so, what type? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel comfortable communicating with people in the workplace in Canada? yes no
- Are there any areas of communication that you have trouble with?

#### Work Experience

- Have you had a job in Canada yet? If so, what job?
- What kind of career do you want to do in Canada? Which industries are of interest to you?
- What areas of language do you think you need to improve in to reach your career goals in Canada?
- How do you think participation in this course will help you in your life in Canada?



# Appendix B - Questionnaire #1

## Language for Work Learner Questionnaire #1

Please provide us with comments, which we will use to improve the course.

What experience do you have with online learning?

What are your expectations of the facilitator in this course?

For support:

For interaction:

Other:

What are your expectations of engagement with this course?

With peers:

With facilitators:

With content:

What other expectations do you have for this course?



# Appendix C - Questionnaire #2

## Language for Work Learner Questionnaire #2

Have you used the following features of the course (bold your answer):

Weekly Videos in the Instructor Updates – Yes or No

The Rubric for Discussion Posts – Yes or No

The Tutorials in the Introduction Module – Yes or No

The Course Webinar – Yes or No (if Yes – Live or Recorded)

Comments:

How do you feel about the interactions in this course?

Between you and your classmates:

Between you and the course facilitators:

Between you and the content:

Would you be willing to participate in a focus group after the completion of the course?

In a focus group we will gather together (either face-to-face at BVC, or in an online webinar room) where we will ask you some questions about the course and try to generate some discussion together.

Yes or No

If Yes, which options do you prefer:

Online – Weekday Daytime or Weekday Evening or Saturday Morning

At BVC – Weekday Daytime or Weekday Evening or Saturday Morning



# Appendix D - Questionnaire #3

## Language for Work Learner Questionnaire #3

Please comment on the following components of this course, as best as you can:

Course Content

Course Videos

Course Support

Online Facilitation

Discussion Forums

Drop Box Assignments

Did you have any difficulties in this course? If yes, please explain.

Did you experience any significant feelings of isolation in this course? If yes, please explain.

Did you experience any significant feelings of community in this course? If yes, please explain.

We will host a feedback session on Tuesday the 14th at 5:30 pm – in your email response please let us know if you can attend, and if you will attend online or in-person at BVC.



# Appendix E – Introduction Forum Questions

Use this forum if you have any general questions or comments about the course, or if you want to post any links or start any 'side discussions' related to the course.

Also, use this forum to introduce yourself. Answer the introduction questions below in your group's discussion thread:

- How long have you been in Canada?
- Which city did you arrive in? And who did you come with?
- Are you working now? If yes, tell us a bit about your job. What do you hope to learn in this course?
- Does your name have any meaning? What does your name mean in your first language?

Please post your Introduction by end of day on Saturday, February 14th. Reply to as many people as you like!





# Appendix F – Introduction Follow-Up Forum Questions

Read through your classmates' responses to the introduction activity in the Introduction Module and answer the following questions.

To answer the questions, you will need to read the introductions posted in the other groups as well as your own:

- Who has been in Canada the longest?
- Who has been in Canada for the shortest time?
- Who first arrived to a city other than Calgary?
- Who came from a country different from yours? (name 1 person)
- Who is currently working? (name 1 person)
- What is the most common expectation for this course?
- Who has a name that you did not know the meaning of before today? (name 1 person)

*By Wednesday, February 18th, post your answers in your group's thread.*

