



# **Online Business Writing: Mechanics and the UnWritten Rules Final Report**

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## Executive Summary

The purpose of this final report is to provide a cumulative summary of information on project activities for the Online Business Writing: Mechanics and the UnWritten Rules project, conducted by the NorQuest College Centre for Intercultural Education.

For many internationally educated professionals with documented credentials and experience in their country of origin, one of the barriers to obtaining employment as well as retention and promotion is their "soft skills" including their professional communication skills. Successful communication competence for the Canadian workplace requires integrated knowledge and skills of both linguistic and socio-cultural language performance in order for internationally educated professionals to be perceived as competent by their Canadian and established immigrant colleagues and supervisors. We believe that both aspects of communication competence can be taught using an interculturally sensitive approach to business communication language development.

Based on a search of the ECampus Alberta course listing in June 2011, no online courses on eCampus Alberta's directory focus on this target learner audience for business writing and communications. Business writing and communication courses offered from a "culture-blind" Canadian culture perspective are available. Based on course descriptions, these courses do not address communication style or values differences informed by cultural perspectives as part of their curriculum. A face-to-face version of this course has been successfully provided to internationally educated professionals in Edmonton and area businesses. The CIE's clients have indicated interest in accessing this kind of professional development opportunity in an online format.

In collaboration with Elizabeth Hanlis, the instructional designer contracted for the project, the project team designed a course map for offering Business Writing online. The ADDIE model (analyze, design, develop, implement, evaluate) was used to guide instructional design of the course. The course map outlined the key learning objectives for the course which targeted the co-development of writing mechanics (formatting, organization, etc.), soft skills (pragmatics) and intercultural exploration (through comparisons and interaction with fellow participants).

The content of the face-to-face course, Business Writing: Mechanics and the UnWritten Rules, was organized into 7 modules with both a mechanics and pragmatics foci. The course is largely didactic in terms of learning outcomes as might be expected from a writing course, and intercultural exploration is achieved largely through individual reflection on one's first culture (C1) rules, norms, and assumptions, and through comparing these reflections to the concepts outlined in the course material. Participants in the pilots were asked to spend between 2-4 hours per week reading the online materials and completing a range of learning activities. In every module they were invited to complete a number of practice exercises (the number and degree was always at their discretion), at least one written assignment (submitted for feedback), and a few postings on the discussion board. The course was entirely asynchronous in format.

Pre- and post-course business writing assessments were used to determine specific business writing communication gains. In the CIE's experience, internationally educated professionals who have established technical competence in their fields (such as engineering, accounting) and who are working for Edmonton-based businesses will often fail to modify their tone and relative directness or indirectness of written correspondence in communication with clients once they have achieved a functional communication style with co-workers. This lack of adaptation and awareness of nuance in communication by internationally educated professionals can create problems in their relationships with clients

and can negatively impact the perception of these professionals by clients who often primarily have contact through email and other written communication forms.

Three pilots were offered between May 2012 and April 2013. 60 participants were recruited with 26 completing all course requirements. Onsite orientations were offered prior to each pilot. Pre- and post-writing assessments were collected and reviewed by 2 assessors to identify language gains. Pre-course Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessments were collected to identify participants' orientations to cultural differences and similarities.

Lessons learned included participant time management to complete online course activities, with differences in the amount of time and when the course was used between participants who completed the course and participants who did not complete the course. Computer literacy was a component for participant success, including challenges when some aspects of computer literacy were weaker (e.g. file management) and some learners' attempt to avoid using the online learning environment, preferring to use more familiar tools such as email attachments for assignment submission. Learner agency was an issue; learners who successfully completed the course demonstrated their ability and desire to take responsibility for their own learning. Learners who did not complete all of the course requirements demonstrated behaviors indicative of their expectation for the instructor to resolve any issues they encountered while learning online. Intercultural sensitivity assessments indicated a significant difference in orientation stage to cultural differences and similarities in one of the pilot cohorts, compared to the other 2. Participation in the online course learning activities was more frequent for participants scoring in the Minimization stage, according to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. For the cohort scoring in the Polarization stage, participation in the online learning activities and overall time in the course was lower and the results of learner gains were lower as well.

Implications of the project results include a need to reconsider how much and what kind of instructor presence activities are supportive of learner engagement and success in an online course, including a higher demand on the instructor to clarify learner roles, instructor expectations and how learners engage with online course content and learning activities. The differences in what learners are expected to do within an online course, developed using Canadian norms for learner and instructor roles need to be clarified and supported by the instructor across the course. Further work on how instructors can bridge the cultural distance for learners adapting to unfamiliar roles in an online learning environment is needed.

Project deliverables are available on the NorQuest Center for Intercultural Education website at: <http://www.norquest.ca/norquest-centres/centre-for-intercultural-education.aspx>.

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## **Section 1: Summary of Project Activities**

### **Project Background**

In Alberta, the demand for skilled professionals is predicted to exceed the supply within 2 to 5 years. The Alliance of Sector Councils notes that Canada's reliance on internationally trained workers is increasing; it is predicted that 100% of net labour force growth by the end of this decade will be sourced by immigrants. We need to improve our ability to retain them. Current estimates indicate that Canada loses approximately 30% of its new and highly skilled immigrants because they are unable to integrate into the economy and in communities.

For many internationally educated professionals with documented credentials and experience in their country of origin, one of the barriers to obtaining employment as well as retention and promotion is their "soft skills" including their professional communication skills. Successful communication competence for the Canadian workplace requires integrated knowledge and skills of both linguistic and socio-cultural language performance in order for internationally educated professionals to be perceived as competent by their Canadian and established immigrant colleagues and supervisors. We believe that both aspects of communication competence can be taught using an interculturally sensitive approach to business communication language development.

The English in the Workplace training program developed by the NorQuest Center for Intercultural Education (CIE) which includes several courses including Clear Speech, Business Writing (Mechanics and the UnWritten Rules), Conversation Management, Personal Management and the Language of Leadership are unique in how they are designed to combine curriculum and learning activities to simultaneously develop language and communication skills within the context of the workplace and to develop intercultural communication competence in practical ways that apply student's learning directly to their day-to-day work environment. These courses address both the why and the how of using communication strategies that will support integration and success in Canadian workplaces for internationally educated professionals newly come to live and work in Canada. The courses are designed to support language development goals, e.g. clear, concise, well-organized written communication in emails or memos; to support language use and word choices that are appropriate for the context of communication, e.g. how to convey respect and retain relationship while disagreeing with a manager; and to develop practical intercultural communication skills, e.g. the ability to notice and compare similarities and differences in communication styles between their culture of origin and Canadian culture and the ability to tolerate ambiguity and suspend judgement of differences in order to communicate and work effectively together in ethnoculturally diverse teams and organizations.

### **Need Addressed by Project**

Based on a search of the ECampus Alberta course listing in June 2011, no online courses on eCampus Alberta's directory focus on this target learner audience for business writing and communications. Business writing and communication courses offered from a "culture-blind" Canadian culture perspective are available. Based on course descriptions, these courses do not address communication style or values differences informed by cultural perspectives as part of their curriculum. A face-to-face version of this course has been successfully provided to internationally educated professionals in Edmonton and area businesses. The

CIE's clients have indicated interest in accessing this kind of professional development opportunity in an online format.

## **Project Activities**

### **Development of technology framework and course map**

In collaboration with Elizabeth Hanlis, the instructional designer contracted for the project, the project team designed a course map for offering Business Writing online. The ADDIE model (analyze, design, develop, implement, evaluate) was used to guide instructional design of the course. The course map outlined the key learning objectives for the course which targeted the co-development of writing mechanics (formatting, organization, etc.), soft skills (pragmatics) and intercultural exploration (through comparisons and interaction with fellow participants). The most critical component to this process was to adapt all learning to have a self-guided component where the learner is responsible for studying and contributing assignments online for a predetermined deadline; and a teacher-guided component where all learners would receive feedback on their demonstration of the key learnings for the course, assignments and assessment criteria. See Appendix B for the Online Business Writing Course map.

### **Adaptation of Business Writing: Mechanics and the UnWritten Rules to BlackBoard Learning System**

The content of the face-to-face course, Business Writing: Mechanics and the UnWritten Rules, was organized into 7 modules with both a mechanics and pragmatics foci. The course is largely didactic in terms of learning outcomes as might be expected from a writing course, and intercultural exploration is achieved largely through individual reflection on one's first culture (C1) rules, norms, and assumptions, and through comparing these reflections to the concepts outlined in the course material. Participants in the pilots were asked to spend between 2-4 hours per week reading the online materials and completing a range of learning activities. In every module they were invited to complete a number of practice exercises (the number and degree was always at their discretion), at least one written assignment (submitted for feedback), and a few postings on the discussion board. Discussion board postings that look very much like an email or a text thread were used to simulate the interaction that would occur in a face-to-face learning environment. The discussion board was designed for participants to create a class dynamic in this online space, built friendships and learned about each other's cultures. This course was entirely asynchronous in delivery, as the nature of the course material we felt, lent itself well to this kind of delivery. Additionally, we reasoned that an asynchronous delivery would reinforce the overall objectives as students were required to use written means to communicate with one another. In this mode of delivery, there was heavy emphasis on the use of the discussion board as a means to reinforce the key concepts of the course, but also to explore cultural similarities and differences, and engage teachable moments pertaining to both.

### **Development of Research and Evaluation Framework**

Pre- and post-course business writing assessments will be used to determine specific socio-cultural business writing communication gains. In the CIE's experience, internationally educated professionals who have established technical competence in their fields (such as engineering, accounting) and who are working for Edmonton-based businesses will often fail to modify their tone and relative directness or indirectness of written correspondence in

communication with clients once they have achieved a functional communication style with co-workers. This lack of adaptation and awareness of nuance in communication by internationally educated professionals can create problems in their relationships with clients and can negatively impact the perception of these professionals by clients who often primarily have contact through email and other written communication forms.

The impact of the course on learning outcomes will also be evaluated by comparing results from 3 groups of learners. The first group will be the control group of approximately 20 learners who complete the online Business Writing course. The second group will be up to 20 learners who have completed a previous offering of Conversation Management course prior to taking the online Business Writing course offered as part of this project. The third group of approximately 20 learners will be provided with an Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessment<sup>1</sup> and feedback session prior to beginning of the online Business Writing course. Learning gains in business writing proficiency will be compared between each group of learners to assess the impact of the two different approaches to pre-requisite knowledge and awareness of intercultural sensitivity and communication competence.

The *Conversation Management* course covers intercultural and culture-general concepts such as hierarchy/egalitarian, direct/indirect communication styles, etc. as they relate to socio-cultural communication competence. It is the CIE’s hypothesis that this pre-requisite will most effectively support enhanced business writing communication gains for socio-cultural and pragmatic language use when compared to learners who have not completed this pre-requisite.

### Pilot Offerings of Online Business Writing

60 participants were recruited for the Online Business Writing course pilots.

*Table 1: Participants and Completion Numbers*

Pilot/Type of course (workplace/pre-workplace)	Participants who registered	Participants who started the course	Participants who completed 100% of the course requirements
Pilot 1: May 7 – Jul 6, 2012	15	14	8
Pilot 2: Oct 8 – Nov 30, 2012	27	21	7
Pilot 3: Feb 8 – Apr 10, 2013	18	16	11
<b>TOTAL:</b>	60	51	26

Although the project team met the target for the number of learners recruited, we encountered some challenges in the recruitment and retention of learners. Participants were successfully recruited from companies across Alberta (Calgary, Edmonton and Fort

<sup>1</sup> The IDI is a validated instrument developed by Dr. Mitch Hammer to assess intercultural sensitivity (i.e. awareness of differences and similarities in others) and intercultural competence (i.e. the ability to appropriately act and respond to differences and similarities in others). See <http://www.norquest.ca/cfe/intercultural/resources.htm#InterculturalDevelopmentInventory> for more information on the IDI.

McMurray). The pilot instructor found learners had varied understandings of the focus of the course and what they were expected to learn. As much of the learner recruitment happened within organizations, the chain of communication between CIE recruiter, HR professional and/or Diversity Officer, division manager and learner seemed to work well for some learners and less well for others. In some cases, we found a gap between learner expectations of the course and the focus of the course despite providing written descriptions of the course, the course outcomes and a description of what to expect in the course. This mismatch contributed to some of the learner attrition from the pilots. Another factor identified by learners related to early exits from the course included shift and/or increase in workload. As it has been explained to us by participants in both face-to-face workshops and online courses, both the competitive nature of the petroleum industry and the project-based nature of the work, result in a workload which can vary quite dramatically over the course of a quarter. Project leads, who tend to make up a significant portion of the participants in our course offerings, seem to always be dealing with projects being understaffed and staff being pilfered by competitors. As a result their workload can fluctuate drastically within relatively short time periods. This has traditionally been a constant in our workplace training efforts in this industry context.

### **Dissemination Activities**

The project team disseminated results at two knowledge-sharing/networking events in both Edmonton and Calgary. Table 2 highlights project dissemination activities.

*Table 2: Summary of Dissemination Activities*

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Audience</b>
Key Contributors to Immigrant Integration and Workplace Productivity—Knowledge-sharing and networking event; February 26 <sup>th</sup> , 2013; Edmonton Chamber of Commerce	Employers, non-profit immigrant service providers, internationally-educated professionals (n=11)
Key Contributors to Immigrant Integration and Workplace Productivity—Knowledge-sharing and networking event; March 8 <sup>th</sup> , 2013; Bow Valley College, Calgary	Employers, non-profit immigrant service providers, internationally-educated professionals (n=20)

### **Deliverables**

The following project deliverables are posted on the NorQuest Center for Intercultural Education website:

1. Online Business Writing Course Map
2. Project Report

## Section 2: Summary of Project Outcomes

**Table 3: Project outcomes and indicators**

Outcomes	Target Indicators	Result
60 learners participate in pilot offerings	At least 80% of participants complete pilot offerings.	Pilot 1: 57% completion Pilot 2: 33% completion Pilot 3: 69% completion  51% completion overall
Online Business Writing improves learner business writing communication competence.	80% of participants completing the course demonstrate increases in pre- and post-assessments of business writing tasks.	Approximately 85% of participants who completed the course demonstrated overall increase in their writing performance.
Online Business Writing course is perceived by learners as relevant and accessible.	80% of participants completing the course agree Online Business Writing course is relevant and accessible.  80% of participants completing the course would recommend the course to others.	72% of the final survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the OBW course was relevant to their workplace duties.  76% of the final survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the OBW course was accessible.  70% of final survey respondents would recommend the course to others.
Business writing communication is assessed and compared with a control group using a rubric with at least 2 assessors. The comparison group of learners will receive an intercultural sensitivity awareness intervention in the form of completion of the Intercultural Development Inventory and individual feedback session.	Pre- and post-business writing assessment tasks show greater increase in writing performance gains when compared with a control group completing the Business Writing course with no prior intervention.	Business writing tasks assessed by 2 assessors and showed an increase in writing performance for participants in the OBW course.  Intercultural Development Inventories completed for all learners.

<p>Business writing communication is assessed and compared with a control group using a rubric with at least 2 assessors. The comparison group includes learners who completed a pre-requisite course, Conversation Management prior to completing the Online Business Writing course.</p>	<p>Pre- and post-business writing assessment tasks show greater increase in writing performance gains when compared with a control group completing the Business Writing course with no prior intervention.</p>	<p>Business writing tasks assessed by 2 assessors showed an increase in writing performance for participants in the OBW course.</p> <p>Due to workload constraints within the target organizations, as well as the significant overlap in the piloting of both courses, we were unable to recruit OBW participants from former Conversation Management cohorts. This challenge made creating comparison groups based on pre-requisite participation not possible to implement. Comparison across learner cohorts was based solely on writing task assessments, IDI profile scores, end of course survey results and learner activity logs from Blackboard.</p>
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### **Pilot 1 Offering – Online Business Writing**

The first pilot offering ran from May 1 to June 22, 2012. 15 participants registered for pilot 1; 14 participants started the course and 8 participants completed 100% of the course modules.

This first offering was a learning curve for both instructors and participants. The online format seems to work well with the material and participants, once familiar with the learning management system (LMS), had little trouble accessing the material and doing the required coursework. This pilot had participants from Calgary and, despite not being able to attend the face-to-face orientation, they were able to access and engage the course material quite successfully following the written instructions for how to do so. This first face-to-face orientation was led by the instructional designer and highlighted a number of best-practices for course lead-in, as well as for working with this learner group: namely very clear, concise instructions, and hands-on practice with all in-course activities and processes. Participants really seemed to enjoy the course material, the individualized instructor feedback, and interacting with one another – indeed, this pilot had a much higher level of learners engaging one another’s comments on the discussion board than the subsequent pilot.

Challenges for the instructor were various. First and foremost, as this project has coincided with a restructuring in the College, the process for initiating set-up of an online course, registering participants, and troubleshooting access issues changed over the timeframe for each pilot. This created some initial barriers for participants to access the course related to College administrative systems rather than the online course itself which proved stressful and frustrating for all of us. This continued through into the second pilot as well and may have contributed to the low completion rates in that offering. Managing an online course was a steep learning curve, as the instructor learned about approaches to structuring assignments and discussion threads, reasonable feedback, and online instructor presence. For some participants, the major challenges included balancing the 3hr a week workload with their other life-responsibilities, as well as the cultural code- and frame-shifting required

for the latter 3 modules of the course. This was evident in their discussions as well as their assignment submissions. In addition, a higher language level seems most definitely required for the kinds of subtle communication practiced in these modules on sensitive communication and negative messages.

### **Pilot 2 Offering – Online Business Writing**

The second pilot offering ran from October 5 to November 30, 2012. 27 participants registered for pilot 2; 21 participants started the course and 7 participants completed 100% of the course modules.

This second offering had many of the same successes and challenges of the first. Again, some participants were accessing the course from as far away as Fort McMurray, unable to attend the face-to-face orientation, and still able to successfully complete the course utilizing the written information for doing so. The instructor led the face-to-face orientation alone for this pilot and made some minor changes based on conversations with the designer and observations from the first pilot. This resulted in a much tighter session which touched on all the essential information and then backed it up with clear, concise written documentation for take-home. Almost 20 people joined the face-to-face orientation, and left the session with positive comments and a general sense of excitement to begin the course.

This pilot proved even more challenging due to the College-wide restructuring, as processes changed once again, and lines of communication were unclear. A few participants encountered recurrent problems with their registration, however in the end were successfully added to the course roster. Attrition was particularly high and rapid in this pilot; over two-thirds of the people enrolled, attempted the course material, but failed to submit even the first assignment. This perhaps may be due to internal workload issues within the participants' organization (all came from one organization this round) or perhaps the course not meeting their expectations in one way or another. The only comment the instructor received was that people were very busy at work and unable to keep up with the course workload in addition to their regular responsibilities. From a course-management perspective, the second pilot went much more smoothly as the instructor was able to re-establish and reuse processes and documents from the first, allowing for much more time spent evaluating and interacting with students once they were all enrolled. This too was not as successful as with the first pilot, and this cohort seemed to do only enough to fulfil the requirements for the course and seemed less keen on interacting with their fellow participants. However, there seemed to be fewer challenges this round with respect to the latter 3 modules and the progression of learning and final submissions were much stronger for the group of learners who completed this pilot successfully.

### **Pilot 3 Offering - Online Business Writing**

The third pilot offering ran from February 8 to April 10, 2013. 18 participants registered for pilot 3; 16 participants started the course and 11 participants completed 100% of the course modules.

As predicted in the interim report, many of the restructuring difficulties had been ironed out by the time this pilot began, and so there were not only clearer lines of communication, but also of responsibility for getting the cohort up and running in this final OBW pilot. There were no recurrent problems with registration and accessing the course, and this may have contributed to the relatively lower rates of attrition in this pilot. Participants seemed very much engaged and contributed regularly to the discussion board, where they seemed quite keen to interact with their fellow friends and colleagues in the course, challenge one another's ideas and share stories about their experiences. This was perhaps the greatest success of this pilot. Overall however, this group seemed the weakest for demonstrating

course outcomes and overall learning. They were unable to demonstrate the key learnings from each module and this worsened over the course of the pilot, with concepts from the last 3 modules being the weakest of all. For their final submission, more than half of the participants simply copied and pasted their pre-assessment letter, changed a couple of words, moved around a sentence or two, and then submitted this as their post-assessment letter and final demonstration of all they had learned in the course. Most of these submissions were rather poor, failing to demonstrate even some of the relatively straightforward plain language guidelines for written correspondence from Modules 1-3.

## **Project Research Study**

Pre and post writing assessments were collected and reviewed by 2 assessors to identify language gains. Pre-course Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessments were also collected from participants. Due to challenges in recruitment of participants, the project team was unable to implement a comparison across each cohort with different pilot conditions. In the initial design, we wanted to compare completion results with a cohort completing Online Business Writing, a cohort with prior completion of the Online Conversation Management course and completion of the IDI assessment with feedback on their profile results. In response to this challenge, we collected IDI and pre- and post-writing assessments and an end of course survey to formally collect participant feedback on the course. We also analysed learner activity logs in the Blackboard course management system. Results of this data collection are discussed in the Lessons Learned section of the report.

## **Lessons Learned**

This section of the report outlines summaries of lessons learned from the Online Business Writing project (learner support, impact on learners, role of instructor in facilitating learner success, and suggestions to develop/adapt a course to online format).

Given that the amount of research into both online intercultural sensitivity training, and online learning in general for this target group (ie. second language speaker immigrants) is limited, one of the major successes of this project and course, is seeing it through to completion and in some small ways, contributing to a larger body of data in these two research areas.

### **Learner Support in an Online Course**

A number of benefits and challenges for this learner group came to the surface over the course of the 3 pilots. These pieces of the overall piloting experience come from a variety of sources: assignments, participant comments, the final survey, discussion group postings, learner activity logs in Blackboard, IDI results, and general facilitator impressions.

#### Adult Learners

One of the consistent themes which came up over and over again in the pilots was time management. Our pilots consisted of adult learners who, for the most part were employed in full-time, demanding occupations which required much of their attention during the day, and who, for the most part, returned to families and responsibilities in the home later on in the evening. These were not only the items they highlighted about themselves in the introductory discussion board posting, but were often the reasons for late submissions, and

extension requests. The most common times of the day learners were accessing the course were from 1-2pm, or from 8-9pm, indicating either at lunch time at the office, or late at night, likely after children are in bed etc. The course outlined an expectation of between 2-4 hrs of dedicated study per week to go through the activities, assignments, and discussion board postings, and this seemed to mostly hold true: Most participants who completed the course successfully and demonstrated some gains were spending at least 2.5-3 hours online in the LMS, and those with weaker language skills requiring more (sometimes considerably). It is also consistent with the survey responses where at least 4 responses to, "What advice would you give to someone who wants to take this course in the future?" have to do with the amount of time required and making sure there is enough time to practice. This may have been a strong contributor to the attrition rates in the pilots. The instructor organized deadlines such that participants could have weekends to work on the course modules, based on the assumption that this would be when they might have more time. In general, the instructor observed were that almost no work was done on the weekends: discussion board postings largely happened during the week, and students tended to log in more during the week, most often in the 1-2 days before the assignments were due. This may have been a contributor to a lack of demonstrated learner gains, and particularly for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> pilots where all the participants came from the same two organizations and were likely working under similar kinds of workplace constraints.

In general, participants spent more time on modules at the beginning of the course than at the end, and the amount of time spent on each of the latter modules dwindled for each of the pilot groups, likely as a result of learner fatigue, a waning of enthusiasm, or perhaps even amassing commitments in other parts of their lives. There may also be other contributors to this, which will be outlined in the sub-sections below. In summary however, these needs and constraints of adult learners must be considered explicitly in the design, outcomes, and communicated expectations for an online course.

### Computer Literacy

One of the requirements for participation in the OBW course was that users have a high level of computer literacy. Prior projects had pointed to this as a necessity for reaching the learning outcomes: if, for example, a participant doesn't understand what a 'link' is in English or even their first language, this forestalls the learning process, often entirely. Computer literacy, however, while still being a crucial component to learning success in an online environment, doesn't assure success, and specific competencies for what this actually means and looks like in such an environment could be clarified even more. For the majority of learners, even though a computer is a daily workplace tool, by and large the applications they utilize and the kinds of processes they engage in are limited and repetitive. So while learners may be able to copy and paste items, follow links, and create documents in Microsoft Word or Excel for example, it does not necessarily mean they are comfortable with file management (naming and organizing), gaining access to and navigating an LMS, or using file upload windows for assignments and discussions.

In an effort to minimize these challenges for the OBW course, we set up not only a face-to-face orientation session to orient students to the LMS, demonstrate the basic proficiencies, and outline how to troubleshoot errors, but we also provided written documentation of all these procedures for when each participant was at home or work, by themselves, and perhaps had forgotten much of the orientation session. We also added an extra Introductory module as the first week of the course with some simple tasks for participants to 'learn by doing' in a low-stakes environment, and to help familiarize them with the kinds of tasks required for successful completion of the course. This kind of course start-up is widely-considered best practice for online learning.

Despite these efforts, the instructor still received emails in all pilots from a few participants who were unable to log in and access the course -- even when the registration was

successful and the participant had all the required information. A number of students in the pilots who simply logged in to print off all the module material (or in one case asked the instructor to do this for them) and then emailed their assignments to the instructor as attachments, refusing to utilize the LMS as a learning platform. Despite covering file naming conventions in the orientation session and including a reminder in each assignment, the instructor found students did not follow the requested format for assignment document submissions. It was also sobering to see that most participants in the pilots, ignored the Introduction module and activities almost entirely and did not even log into the course until the following week when assignments for module one were almost due.

### Learner Agency

One of the most interesting facets about working with this learner group is the apparent lack of agency which they seem to have in regards to their own learning. In Canadian learning contexts, it is often referred to as a lack of 'initiative' and comes down to the basic question: whose responsibility is it for the learner to succeed? In current models for online learning, the emphasis is on the individual learner and their ability to take responsibility for their own learning as a guided, yet self-directed and -managed process. The OBW is certainly no different in this respect, and indeed the data for the 3 pilots shows that for those participants who made that connection, the learning outcomes were wholly realized. These participants not only improved their writing skills for sensitive and non-sensitive communication, but also enjoyed the course and are likely the ones who in the final survey, commented on appreciating the flexibility the online learning format provided them.

For others however, this seemed to be problematic. The instructor seemed to be seen largely as the holder of all knowledge, even when the instructor's role was explicitly clarified in the face-to-face orientation, and in the written documentation each participant received. The instructor received numerous emails at the onset of each pilot asking him to solve technical, computer issues related to accessing the course. His response was always to ask first what the participant had already tried to resolve the issue and whether they had yet contacted the help desk. The responses almost invariably were "nothing" and "no" respectively. Similar types of comments can also be seen in the survey data. Past the first two weeks the instructor generally received no comments, questions, or concerns from participants. Correspondence from the learners had to do with the course deadlines usually, and often to request an extension. The instructor did not receive an unsolicited email from a participant seeking clarification of the concepts or outlining a question. The instructor needed to send individual messages to participants before receiving a message that the learner was having difficulties with the material.

When asking students about 'instructor availability and accessibility' (final survey, question #9) is the lowest of all the scores in the survey at 50%. This is interesting given that in this online course the participants had access to the instructor 8 hours a day at least 6 days of the week through email or the LMS. It's also interesting that 57% of the respondents for the final survey came from pilot 3 where, as outlined in the interim report, the instructor made a conscious effort to increase instructor presence to see how that might affect the learning outcomes. It may be of note too, to compare this with the positive score of 79% for participants who feel they completed the course to the best of their ability.

Some different expectations seem to be a work here and possible explanations may come from taking a closer look at certain cultural value orientations that may be involved. The majority of participants in the OBW pilots have been in Canada only 2-3 years, have had little to no experience with online learning (both questions asked in the face-to-face orientation and in the Intro module), and come from high power distance cultures wherein the roles of 'teacher' and 'student' are well-established, strictly defined, and look quite different to how those roles look here. In high power distance cultures the teacher is the holder of all knowledge and is not to be questioned or disagreed with. He/she delivers the

content to be learned (in many cases memorized as rote) and the student performs his/her role by learning and repeating back. The teacher's job is to make concepts clear and outcomes achievable. The student's job is to learn and do, and certainly not to question or explore, for this would imply not only disrespect, but also a loss of face for the teacher. The participants in the face-to-face orientation largely called the instructor 'teacher,' and when the instructor explained how and why he preferred to be called 'Jake', the usual response was "okay, teacher Jake then." This seems to indicate not only a high power distance perception of the role as the facilitator for the course, but also perhaps a predisposition to laying this high power distance role-framework overtop of the online learning model and framework used in the course. At the moment of the course then when a participant has a doubt, which frame guides their decisions? Likely the one they've followed a thousand times before in a similar learning context. In any case, some of these values might help us understand certain outcomes we saw in the course pilots. This seems to be a very large and complex piece of the online learning which needs much more exploration, such that this mode of learning can be as successful as possible for this group of learners.

### Intercultural Development Stage - The IDI

Only pre-course IDI results were gathered for the 3 pilot groups. The reasons for this are three-fold. First, there is no data in the literature to support movement along the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) within such a short intervention period. Because intercultural development is often an identity-rattling process of 'storming and re-norming,' as frames for making sense of the world shift and become more complex, participants need much more time to demonstrate a measurable shift. Second, the OBW course, while engaging an intercultural space and using some intercultural concepts in its framework, is not in essence an intercultural development course. Arguably the 3 modules in the UnWritten Rules section of the course (Modules 5-7) have a strong cultural comparison component to them, but this does not really qualify as an intercultural development piece, and again, these isn't sufficient time to result in a measurable shift. Third, and finally, the purpose of using the IDI at all was simply to see what might be inferred about our participants in the pilots using the lens of the DMIS, and see if there were any possible connections to performance, participation, and outcomes.

That said, there was a notable difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between the three pilot groups. The IDI placed both of the first two groups in the minimization stage, and the third group in polarization. The DMIS outlines then how for pilot groups 1 and 2, minimization – or an emphasis on cultural similarities and an avoidance of cultural differences – is likely part of a fitting in strategy and a way of 'not rocking the boat'. For group 3, in polarization, the DMIS outlines that cultural differences are likely perceived as a threat, and where there are likely to be strong values and judgments attached to these perceptions.

The instructor found the IDI data supportive of some of the comments, feedback, and outcomes he saw in the course. Pilots one and two went much more smoothly in terms of accepting the content provided, and also in terms of participant interaction. Participants largely used more supportive comments on the discussion boards (ie. "It's the same in my culture"), and tended to validate one another's experiences more frequently (ie. "I've had the same experience too."). Participants in both these two pilot groups seemed more likely to look for examples in their work-lives to support the content of the modules and my comments as the facilitator, and overall, they put not only more time into modules 5-7 (the ones dealing with cultural difference), but also scored higher on their post-assessment tasks. Pilot group 3 in contrast was much more challenging as a facilitator, in terms of demonstrated learnings in the assignments, and also for interaction on the discussion board. In many of their assignment submissions, there seemed to be no attempt at demonstrating the concepts covered in the module (particularly for modules 5-7) -- they

instead submitted pieces which demonstrated how they'd always done it -- and the discussion board, while very engaged, was replete with disagreements between participants, and some lengthy postings about which way they preferred and was "the best" in any given context. The average time this group spent on modules 5-7 was also lower than the prior two groups.

If these observations are representative of a real connection between demonstrable skills and the IDI, it may be grounds for some revision in the way the course is organized or structured. Clearly it seems that for the final pilot group the challenge level was too high. Given that we know that moving individuals from one stage to the next along DMIS is about balancing the proper, stage-specific combination of challenges and supports, it may have implications for splitting the course into two separate courses, or setting prerequisites to The UnWritten Rules modules, such that students are developmentally able to shift with greater success.

### Mechanics vs. The UnWritten Rules

In general, participants tended to demonstrate improvements for the concepts taught in the first four modules (Mechanics) much better than for the latter 3 modules (The UnWritten rules). The content of Modules 1-4 lends itself well to an online asynchronous delivery model, it's much more didactic in the instructional style used, and is more about simplifying, clarifying, and organizing. It's about discerning 'which information where' in an effort to enhance clarity and uptake of the writers message. In this way, while there is some flexibility, there is an established checklist of guidelines and participants can essentially check off whether they've achieved these principles or not. In addition, the pilot groups were largely made up of estimators, engineers, and project leads, for whom spreadsheets; hard data; and clear, established processes are the norm. Essentially they put numbers into formulae for much of the day and report the results. Modules 1-4 have a high degree of similarity to this sort of a process.

In contrast, participants tended to demonstrate fewer to no improvements for the concepts taught in the UnWritten rules part of the course. This section relies heavily on advanced language skill, having more than one way to express a given idea, and utilizing contextual knowledge (both cultural and sub-cultural) to achieve relational and tangible outcomes from a given piece of written correspondence (pragmatics). For a second language speaker of English, and an immigrant at a determined stage of the integration journey, this is a very tall order. Research also points to the fact that most L2 speakers do not come to understand the pragmatics on their own initiative, without some sort of targeted intervention. Seeing as we were unable to recruit the OBW participants from the Online Conversation Management course, it may well be that this was their first exposure to differences of this kind. Taking into account the IDI profiles, for groups in polarization or in minimization with defense trailing orientations, these differences would likely be perceived as either non-existent or as a threat. Uptake in these cases would likely be minimal, not to even touch on demonstration of skill. In a face-to-face delivery of this course, the facilitator helps through dialogue and intuitive 'teachable moments' to fill in these gaps for the learners. In an online environment, given the concerns about learner agency outlined above, this remains a very large challenge as this learner group seems less likely to voluntarily articulate concerns, challenges, disagreements, and questions -- especially to the facilitator.

### **Impact on Learners**

The impact of the course on the learners follows suit from this discussion.

From the participants' perspectives the course evaluation runs the range of possible responses. For many it seemed an extremely useful expenditure of time and energy. For some others it was not enough and left them wanting more. For others still it did not meet their needs or their expectations at this point in their careers or their journey in Canada.

Learner responses:

*"I really enjoyed the course and everybody was great. I had fun and learn at the same time."*

*"Seems at the end we didn't get a conclusion of our studying."*

*"Overall, my experience with this course was great. Our instructor was great and very helpful and approachable."*

*"I would only advise people who have difficulty in written communication in English to take the course. For people who have done their education in Canada, it is only slightly useful."*

*"This course is a good introduction of business writing but I feel that the online format is not ideal for this training."*

*"It being online gave us the flexibility to do the work at our own pace. It also saved time in commute."*

(For additional comments, please see Appendix A OBW Survey Report)

From a facilitator perspective the course is a good course that likely needs some revisions to better meet the needs of its diverse target audience in an online environment. There seem to be a number of implicit assumptions to learning and to online delivery which are not necessary congruent with the learning styles and expectations for this learner group and which may be hindering success for a sizable portion of this demographic. More research into the perceptions and experiences of adult ESL immigrant learners with respect to online learning could be illuminating in terms of more efficient ways to better meet integration goals and outcomes. Please see the following subsection on suggestions for adaptation.

### **Role of Instructor in Facilitating Learner Success**

Some of the implications for the role(s) of the instructor in facilitating learner success should already be apparent.

For the 3 different pilots the instructor attempted 3 different levels of online presence to gauge how much support this learner group might require. For pilot 1, the instructor followed guidelines in the literature, and advice from the instructional designer for the amount of time he spent engaging with learners online. For pilot 2, having observed some of the learner agency challenges mentioned above, the instructor intentionally reduced his online presence to see how much learners might engage with one another. Finally in pilot 3, the instructor increased his online presence to the absolute maximum possible while still maintaining other workplace commitments, exceeding the recommendations of the instructional designer. While the reasons for learner engagement and success are too complex to be explained simply by this single connection, the level of facilitator presence may have contributed to certain differences between the pilots. Firstly, there does seem to be a correlation between the amount of attrition in each of the pilots and the amount of facilitator presence, with the percent completion varying consistently with the instructor's online presence efforts. Secondly, there does seem to be a correlation between the amount of online presence and the amount of learner-to-learner interaction. Both pilots 1 and 3 had a much higher percentage of participants not only contributing to the discussion board, but also interacting and exchanging ideas and experiences with others in the cohort. Pilot 2 in contrast had virtually no learner interaction whatsoever, with participants using the discussion board to post their initial thoughts on the task as described, but not contributing ideas to anyone else's posting. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, there does not seem to be a strong correlation between the amount of online presence and learner success -- at

least defined as being able to demonstrate the concepts taught in the modules. Participants in both pilots 1 and 2 were able to demonstrate the concepts taught in the course more consistently, and scored higher on the final post-assessment than did their counterparts in pilot 3. In this regard there seems to be more of a correlation between the IDI results and the DMIS stage of the groups and their overall success in demonstrating the concepts of the modules. This may well be a function of the balance of challenges and supports the course presented to learners in the way it is organized and in its content. It may well be better suited for a learner group in minimization, than for a group polarization for the reasons outlined in the previous subsection. In summary though, more instructor presence seems to pave the way for increased interaction with course materials on a number of levels.

The other consideration for instructors teaching online to this target group stems from the learner agency discussion above. It seems that to truly enhance learning success for this group of learners, an instructor must be able to flex beyond the traditional roles held for teacher and student in a Canadian cultural context, and be prepared to offer more supports to adult ESL online learners. These supports may include things like: more frequent check-ins, more explicit and articulated expectations, more pointed questions and more frequent and insistent engagement in the various media the course utilizes, and more explanation of concepts such that these learners, who often lack contextual knowledge, are better able to demonstrate success. Without these efforts, these learners will often see pieces of the overall 'puzzle' as being relevant, and connect those pieces in tried and tested ways as informed by their personality, cultural values, and life experiences. Essentially instructors must first help learners see the relevant pieces, and then help them connect those pieces in ways that will lead to more successful outcomes in this cultural context.

### **Suggestions to Develop/Adapt an Online ESL Course**

A number of key best practices came to the fore as a result of this project:

- 1) Focus on Outcomes: Activities and tasks that work well in a classroom or in facilitating a workshop, do not necessarily translate well into an online format, be it a synchronous one, or an asynchronous one. Good online courses do not arise from simply taking a face to face curriculum and uploading it onto the web. A translation process is necessary, and this project illustrated how putting a good course together requires dialogue between content experts (in this case intercultural and online learning environments) which continuously re-focuses on the learning outcomes and how learning activities, assignments and assessments align to achieve those outcomes. Consistently asking the question: "What do I want my learners to take away from this?" and then examining the different tools available online to achieve that outcome makes for a solid learning environment.
- 2) Connect the Dots for Learners: In an online course, both learner and instructor roles need to be explained clearly and clarified. A face-to-face delivery of a course or workshop takes a number of things for granted, but mostly what became clear through this project is that the live classroom mode takes for granted the instructor's capacity to fill in the gaps in the moment, 'on the fly.' As a facilitator in a face-to-face OBW workshop, I am able to see my participants, hear where they are at, guide their work and thought process in the moment, and help bridge differences and the confusion they may create in a multi-faceted way through stories, facts and figures, etc., as things arise. In an online course participants work through the material on their own and largely make sense of the content they read with only the context provided through readings, videos, etc. Largely the pieces are set and what participants have garnered from the course content is revealed later through assignments and tasks, rather than in the moment. It's important therefore to make sure the concepts are well laid out and there are clear, explicit connections between them. In the online learning context, it is important to

explicitly focus the instructor's role on the task of facilitating how the learners are making sense of the content. Developing a bank of questions related to the "teachable moments" in the content could be helpful to support this aspect of the instructor's role.

- 3) Consider the Cultural Element: A participant's learning style is in part a function of their cultural background. Really this point follows from point 2 above, but is more about base assumptions that might have a cultural element to them. What participants see as relevant and the ways they may ultimately connect concepts is culturally influenced and may be in some cases very different from what an instructor intends. This is important to keep in mind when designing a course, and is best addressed by continuously asking the question: "What assumptions underlie these concepts and activities? What do I assume my learners know in order to be successful with this material?"
- 4) Consider and Redefine Roles: The roles of teacher and student, instructor and learner, facilitator and participants are very culturally influenced and have a direct impact on the kinds of engagement one is likely to see in an online course. Despite the unwritten rules for these roles in any given context, it may be necessary to negotiate a cultural 'middle-ground' where both the instructor and the student flex and adapt to one another in an effort to achieve successful outcomes. This requires open and honest dialogue about expectations. In the pilots, learners who take more responsibility to make sense of the content and to practice essential skills (e.g. digital literacy, written communication) were successful to achieve course outcomes. One implication of meeting diverse learner needs is to better prepare instructor facilitation resources and variations on learning activities that better align with learners who are less ready to take ownership of their own learning.

## For More Information About the Project

For more information about the project, please visit the NorQuest Center for Intercultural Education at <http://www.norquest.ca/norquest-centres/centre-for-intercultural-education.aspx> or contact [icinfo@norquest.ca](mailto:icinfo@norquest.ca) or 780-644-6770.