

Online Workplace Learning Model Final Report April 2011 – March 2013

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Prepared by:
Cheryl Whitelaw and Erin Waugh
NorQuest College
Center for Intercultural Education

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The Center for Intercultural Education at NorQuest College is committed to the development of intercultural competence in our diverse, multicultural Canadian community. We make progress towards our vision of Canada as a welcoming intercultural space to engage with and benefit from our similarities and difference through collaboration with many people who we would like to acknowledge.

Thank you for your diverse participation and contribution to this project.

Project Team:

NorQuest Center for Intercultural Education

Erin Waugh, project lead; Cheryl Whitelaw, project manager, Sarah Apedaile, research consultant, Todd Odger, project governance and partnership facilitator; Yuji Abe, online instructional support; Darcy MacDonald, participant recruitment; Kelly Steele, project administration support.

Faculty of Foundational and Intercultural Studies, NorQuest College

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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 Workplace Learning Model project, conducted by the NorQuest College Centre for Intercultural education.

The onboarding, retaining and promoting of Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs) are the topic of extensive discussion and exploration in the Alberta workplace. NorQuest College has been working with industry partners for over ten years to find practical solutions to the challenges these areas present. In this project, a model to develop both pragmatics (soft skills) competence and intercultural sensitivity in an online format was developed and explored. To test the model, an existing course, Conversation Management was adapted to an online format and delivered using Blackboard Learning Management system and Elluminate Live (Blackboard Collaborate) virtual class system.

Four pilots were offered—two offerings for IEPs within their chosen occupation (workplace) and two offerings for IEPs seeking employment in their field (pre-workplace). Pilots were offered from February to December 2012. 98 participants registered for pilots; 67 completed 75% or more of course requirements and 50 participants completed 100% of course requirements. Pilot courses were offered for 30 hours over 10 weeks with between two and four hours of self-study per week and a one hour virtual course session each week. Attrition rates for participants ranged from 29 – 43% from course commencement to completion and were slightly higher for pre-workplace participants than for workplace participants. An overall attrition rate of 11% across pilots occurred from registration to course commencement.

E-learning experts were consulted to review the course both from an e-learning practices perspective and from the perspective of course content and learning outcomes. The project team developed assessment and evaluation tools for pragmatic competence and used the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) for intercultural sensitivity to research changes in pragmatic language competence and intercultural sensitivity.

For participants who completed course requirements, results from the four pilots showed development in both pragmatic and intercultural competence over the 30-hour course.

The project team shared these results at ATESL conference, TESL Canada conference and two knowledge-sharing events in Edmonton and Calgary. Project deliverables are available on the NorQuest Center for Intercultural Education website at: <http://www.norquest.ca/norquest-centres/centre-for-intercultural-education.aspx>.

The model tested during this project can be applied to multiple workplaces in flexible business-driven formats to provide IEPs with an advantage in developing the soft skills they need to succeed in the Canadian workplace.

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. Alberta employers will therefore need to increasingly rely on Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs) to fulfill the demand. Nationally, 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. For many IEPs with documented credentials and experience in their country of origin, one of the barriers to retention and promotion is their "soft skills"; i.e. their professional communication skills and their ability to work effectively with others. They are also less likely to be asked to lead teams and gain the experience in a Canadian context that supports upward mobility within a company. This gap in competence is often identified as a gap in language proficiency and contributes to the under-employment of skilled immigrants. In 2008, more immigrant workers (42%) aged 25 to 54 were overqualified for their work compared to 28% of Canadian born workers. Regardless of period of landing, immigrants had higher shares of over-qualification.¹

This project researched a model to provide current professionals with an opportunity to develop and apply professional language proficiencies within their current work environment; opening the way to greater integration in the workplace and leadership roles within their field.

Need Addressed by Project

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.² For many IEPs with documented credentials and experience in their country of origin, one of the barriers to retention and promotion is their "soft skills"; i.e. their professional communication skills, their ability to work effectively with others and their ability to learn continuously. In a Canadian workplace context, an IEP may find the communication skills and workplace behaviors familiar to them do not produce the results they intend in Canada. For example, how good team work is defined in Canada includes culturally embedded ideas of roles, responsibilities, and ways to communicate among team members in order to achieve company goals. Without understanding the underlying cultural values, IEPs may not be able to identify how and why their actions in a team are unsuccessful. They are also less likely to be asked to lead teams and gain the experience in a Canadian context that supports upward mobility within a company.

This project researched and implemented a model that provides current professionals with an opportunity to develop and apply these professional language proficiencies within their current work environment; opening the way to greater integration in the workplace and leadership roles within their field. This project provides an evidence-based model to engage internationally educated professionals with continuous learning opportunities while they work

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 Conversation Management 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 soft skills (pragmatics) and intercultural sensitivity. The most critical component to this process was

¹ (Stats Canada, 71-606-X2009001).

² (Retrieved from <http://www.councils.org/our-priorities/internationally-trained-workers/>).

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 meet online on a virtual classroom to discuss class content, assignments and assessment criteria. See Appendix A for the Conversation Management Course map.

Adaptation of Conversation Management to BlackBoard Learning System

The content of the face-to-face course, Conversation Management, was organized into ten modules with both pragmatics and intercultural sensitivity foci. 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. 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. In addition to the online content and learning activities/assignments, there was a once a week one hour virtual class. The intent here was to have a forum for questions about the self-study materials, and learning about intercultural skills like empathy and perception. This instructor-led weekly class was designed as a place to practice some of the new pragmatics skills that the participants were using in their daily working lives. For example, a group of participants in pilot 3 asked if we could simulate a meeting in which they needed to request leaving early and disrupt the flow of the meeting, a high stakes communication interaction. This kind of customization, often common in the face-to-face classroom was easily transferred to the online setting once participants were comfortable with the technology and etiquette. The virtual class session was recorded and accessible to participants who could not attend and for review purposes.

Development of Research and Evaluation Framework

An ethics application was submitted for this project exploring the following research questions:

1. Can intercultural sensitivity outcomes be achieved through online learning using a developmental approach?
2. Can pragmatic competence be improved in an online course delivery targeting native speakers' norms for appropriate language use?

This two-pronged approach of teaching both intercultural sensitivity and pragmatics was the first study of its kind based on our extensive literature review into research in these two areas. Although some research has been done for online learning of each of these concepts separately, no one has yet explored their development using an online format together. For research design and results please see the Summary of Project Outcomes section in this report. See Appendix B for the Annotated Bibliography.

Four Pilot Offerings of Online Conversation Management

There were four total pilot offerings of Online Conversation Management. Each pilot was offered over 10 weeks for 30 hours. Participants completed two to four hours of self-study each week. In addition to the online content and learning activities/assignments, there was a once a week one hour virtual class. Pilot 1 ran from February 6th to April 16th, 2012; Pilot 2 from May 7th to July 17th, 2012; Pilot 3 began on October 1st and ended on December 7th, 2012 and Pilot 4 began on October 5th and was completed on December 14th, 2012.

After the first pilot, which proved that the recruitment of working professionals could be quite challenging, the team developed a pre-workplace version of the course. This course focused on the same intercultural and pragmatics skills as the workplace course only with a focus on tasks and activities more compatible to someone looking to re-enter his or her profession in Canada rather than professionals who had already achieved this status. Pilots 2 and 3 were therefore pre-workplace course offerings to clients of the Bredin Institute, employment development specialists with a focus on immigrant settlement and workplace bridging programs. Table 1 outlines the participant completion numbers for the pre-workplace and workplace offerings of the course.

Table 1: Pre-workplace and Workplace Participants and Completion Numbers

Pilot/Type of course (workplace/pre-workplace)	Participants who registered	Participants who started the course	Participants who completed 75% of course requirements ³	Participants who completed 100% of the course requirements
Pilot 1: Workplace	10	7	2	2
Pilot 2: Pre-workplace	40	39	6	25
Pilot 3: Pre-workplace	25	21	4	12
Pilot 4: Workplace	23	20	5	11
TOTAL:	98	87	17	50

Recruitment and Retention of Participants

Recruitment and retention of participants was, in part, a challenge in the project. High levels of expressed interest in participating by employed internationally educated professionals did not necessarily translate into registrations for the pilot course sessions. Higher participation came from a partnership with Bredin Institute who facilitated participant registration and participation for IEPs engaged in pre-employment preparation programs. There was an 11% attrition rate across all pilots from registration to course commencement. The range of attrition from course commencement to completion was 29% to 43% across pilots. Fetzner, 2013 identifies ranges of 60% to 95% retention in online distance learning for community colleges.⁴ The most often cited reason for attrition by project participants was an increase in workload and a resulting concern participants did not have enough time to work on the course and personal reasons (changes in job status, family issues and personal technology challenges, e.g. computer quit). These reasons mirror the top three reasons for attrition cited in Fetzner's study that have remained consistently true over 10 years of implementing a survey for students who were not successful in online study, students getting behind and too hard to catch up, personal problems, e.g. job and child care issues and not able to handle study combined with family responsibilities).⁵ Slightly higher attrition rates were experienced in the pre-workplace pilot cohorts than for the workplace cohorts. We believe this related to primary participant goals in the pre-workplace cohort, e.g. obtaining employment and the withdrawal from the course when that goal was achieved. Further work to explore learner goals and motivations to study online for internationally educated professionals is needed to address retention in online courses.

Revision of Course Materials

Two separate course revisions were completed as part of this project. The first, during the recruitments phase for pilot 2 between March and May 2012; the second prior to pilots 3 and 4 in September, 2012. The first revision was to take the existing content for workplace IEPs and adapt it to a pre-workplace audience. As explained in our interim report for January to March, 2012, NorQuest partnered with the Bredin Institute in an effort to increase participation. This course adaptation

³ Participants who completed all of the course requirements includes, assignments, discussion board postings, 80% attendance in Elluminate Live (online virtual classroom) sessions and pre and post pragmatics and intercultural sensitivity assessments. Those who completed only 75% of the course requirements missed one of the two post-assessments and more than two module assignments. Many from this group were able to complete their Elluminate Live requirements by listening to the session later from a recorded link sent to them by the instructor.

⁴ Fetzner, M. (2013). What do unsuccessful online students want us to know? *Journal of asynchronous learning networks*, 17(1), 13-27.

⁵ Fetzner, M. (2013), p. 15.

focused on rewriting online activities, and discussion board topics to reflect the needs of a pre-workplace IEP.

The second revision in September, 2012 involved a re-sequencing of some of the content. The project team felt that introducing the topic of Time Management at an earlier stage would go hand in hand with learning about how to study online and manage time effectively to keep up with the course requirements. This small change in the content sequence provided the instructor with opportunities to address issues of late assignments submissions and/or absences during the online virtual classes and relate them back to the impressions that this behavior would leave on a co-worker thus allowing the instructor to simulate real-world feedback as it would occur in a workplace environment with regards to poor time management.

In addition to the two phases of revision, the project team enlisted the support of two e-learning experts to evaluate the course outcomes and content. Reviewers completed their assessments of the course during Phase 2 of the project and prior to the final two pilots. This was a process undertaken instead of convening an advisory committee as originally planned. The rationale for this choice involved two criteria. First, convening an advisory committee to discuss the challenges of immigrant integration in the workplace seemed redundant since NorQuest College has a depth of knowledge and experience in this kind of research. We felt that it would be better to convene experts on the model being tested, i.e., experts in e-learning and experts in second language acquisition assessment. As such, the deliverables are stronger given that both groups of experts contributed to the validation of this model. The course itself produced strong data to support this model of learning and the assessment tools developed and disseminated in the deliverables for this project have proven to be significantly reliable across assessors. For anecdotal comments made by the e-learning experts on the course, please see the heading on e-learning expert feedback in Section 2: Summary of Project Outcomes in this report.

Project Research Study

Participants in the pilot offerings of the course were asked as part of the course activities to complete a pre- and post-language assessment and intercultural sensitivity assessment. The pre-course assessment included completion of the Intercultural Development Inventory and discourse completion tasks in written and oral formats. Post-course assessment was a repetition of the discourse completion tasks and completion of another Intercultural Development Inventory questionnaire. A post-course satisfaction survey and focus group was also conducted for each pilot.

Seven English as Second Language (ESL) instructors were recruited to assess a random sample of pre- and post oral and writing samples. To support their assessment, project lead, Erin Waugh, designed a pragmatics rubric which was field tested at both the ATESL and TESL Canada conferences with 60 ESL professionals. In addition, Erin met with TESL professors from the University of Alberta to ensure that all of the necessary second language acquisition topics were being adequately addressed for this pragmatics rubric.

In January and February 2013, the seven assessors rated 10 speaking and five writing samples from course participants on the same tasks given prior to the course beginning and upon course completion. Each of the seven assessors spent between three and four hours, learning the rubric, practicing assessment for calibration and then assessing the pre and post learner responses.

On a six-band scale for speaking, all of the rated participants improved by close to half (0.35) of a band level (see Figure 1). In writing, all of the rated participants improved by over half of a band level (0.65). Based on the CLB-referenced course outcomes for pragmatics in the speaking section of the CLB, participants were rated closer to level 7 at the beginning of the course and further toward level 8 and 9 at the end of the course. For expanded comparisons, please refer to Appendix C: Comparison chart of Pragmatics Rubric and CLB Pragmatics Performance Descriptors.

The results from the Intercultural Development Inventory questionnaires were analyzed by the project team. Across all pilot participants, the most common clustering of the inventory profile showed a perceived orientation score of Acceptance, between 115.10 to 118.69 out of a scale range from 55 to 145. A perceived orientation of Acceptance means how the group "rates its own capability in understanding and appropriately adapting to cultural differences within Acceptance, reflecting an orientation that recognizes and appreciates patterns of cultural difference in one's own and other

cultures in values, perceptions and behaviors.”⁶ Across almost all pilot participants, the most common clustering of the developmental orientation score was Polarization, between 75.14 to 80.53 out of a scale range from 55 to 145. A developmental orientation of Polarization means “reflecting an “us and them” judgmental viewpoint toward cultural differences, that can take form of (1) Defense, in which different values, perceptions and behaviors associated with a culturally different group of people tend to be evaluated negatively and values, perceptions and behaviors of “my” group are judged more favorably, or (2) Reversal, in which other cultural practices are less critically evaluated and cultural practices within one’s own group are likely to be judged from an overly critical standpoint.”⁷ One cohort had a developmental orientation of Minimization, 85.63 out of a scale range from 55 to 145. This cohort with a developmental orientation of Minimization was a workplace cohort, not a pre-employment cohort. A developmental orientation of Minimization indicates a “tendency to highlight commonalities across cultures that can mask important cultural differences in values, perceptions and behaviors.”⁸

A slight shift (from .43 to 1.81) in perceived orientation (within Acceptance stage) and developmental orientations scores (from Polarization to cusp of Minimization) was documented in pre- and post-group IDI profiles. For the ten participants selected at random for the panel assessment review, 12% of shifted from Polarization stage to Minimization stage from pre- to post-assessments. With the such small shifts and some low completer numbers for post-IDI assessments, it is not possible to make strong assertions based on these results. In looking at participant responses in focus group discussions, we see some indications of the beginning of a shift from a polarizing view of cultural differences to increased capacity to notice similarities between their first culture (C1) and the target culture (C2), in this case, Canadian culture. At minimization, individuals will have a tendency to focus on the similarities between cultures, this allowing them to potentially work more harmoniously with those from other cultures than would be possible at Polarization. An example of this shift is perhaps best identified in the following comment from a course participant from the post-course focus group:

Focus in the course was looking for similarities. This was good it was an acknowledgement that we are part of the culture. To focus on similarities it is a way we can understand each other. Focus on positive things rather than negative things. You can understand another point of view if you focus on similarities. We will only be successful if we try to understand other’s point of view. In workplace, when work in a team there are the motivations to understand similarities – asking for requests, writing emails – these are things that as professionals, we need these things.

For additional participant responses to the course, please see Section 2: heading *Impact on Learners* in this report.

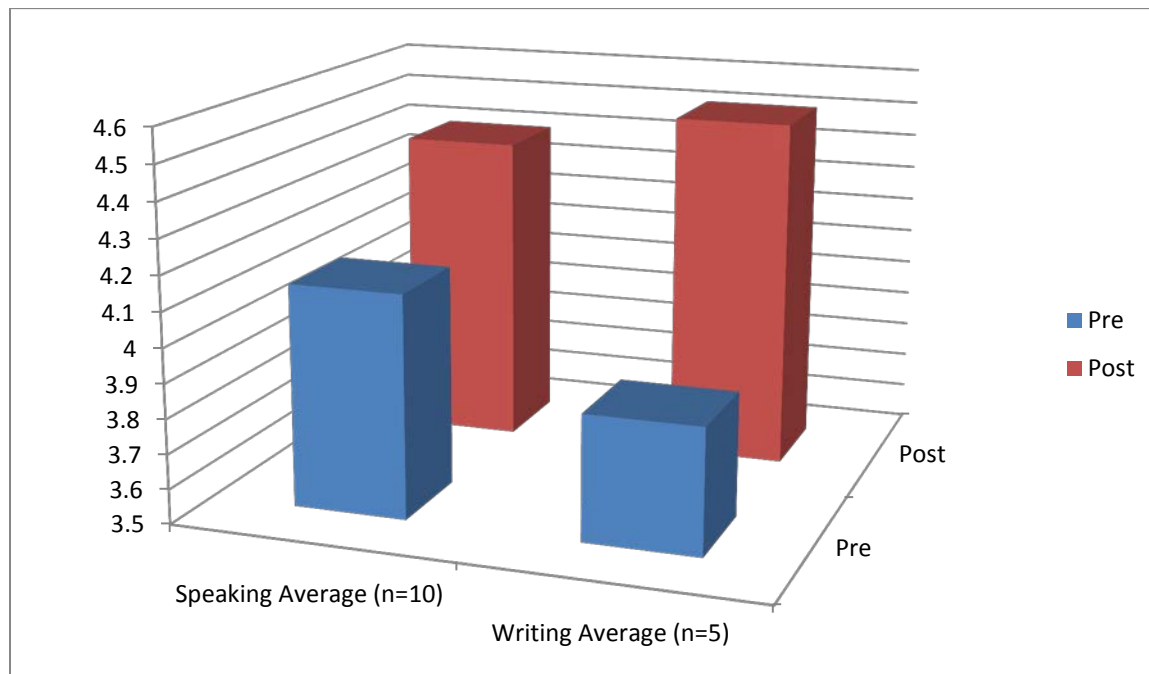
To summarize, the project team tested an online model for the instruction of both pragmatic competence (soft skills ability) and intercultural sensitivity. When a sample of those who completed all of the course requirements from the four pilots was randomly drawn, results showed consistent improvement for both soft skills and intercultural sensitivity, demonstrating the model’s capacity to positively influence both competencies within a 30 hour course offering. Further inquiry is needed to explore the factors or conditions that most effectively support gains in soft skills and intercultural sensitivity and to examine what barriers exist to improvement in these competencies. Figure 1 gives an outline of the final numbers for speaking and writing assessments.

⁶ Intercultural Development Inventory v. 3.

⁷ Intercultural Development Inventory profile, v. 3.

⁸ Intercultural Development Inventory profile, v. 3.

Figure 1: Results of pragmatic competence pre and post for speaking and writing



Dissemination Activities

The project team disseminated research results in two conferences within Canada and two knowledge-sharing/networking events in both Edmonton and Calgary. Table 2 highlights project dissemination activities. A total of 91 ESL/EWP instructors, employers, materials developers, ESL program administrators, ESL consultants, nonprofit immigrant service providers and intercultural trainers attended one or more of these dissemination events.

Table 2: Summary of Dissemination Activities

Activities	Audience
Alberta Teachers of English as a Second Language Conference; Edmonton, November 16-17, 2012; presentation: "Empowering Experiences--Engaging Intercultural and Language Training Online"	English as a second language instructors, English in the workplace instructors, materials developers, program administrators, intercultural trainers, instructional designers (n=50)
Teaching English as a Second Language Canada Conference; Kamloops, BC, October 11-13, 2012; presentation: "Interior Design: An Online Landscape Where Culture and Language Connect"	English as a second language instructors, English in the workplace instructors, materials developers, program administrators, intercultural trainers, instructional designers (n=10)
Key Contributors to Immigrant Integration and Workplace Productivity—Knowledge-sharing and networking event; February 26 th , 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 th , 2013; Bow Valley College, Calgary	Employers, non-profit immigrant service providers, internationally-educated professionals (n=20)
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Deliverables

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

1. Annotated Bibliography
2. Conversation Management Course Map with Canadian Language Benchmark Descriptors
3. Guide for Workplace Coaches
4. Pragmatics Rubric
5. Pre- and Post-Discourse Completion Tasks
6. Project Report
7. Video of Participants

Section 2: Summary of Project Outcomes

Table 3: Project outcomes and indicators

Outcomes	Target Indicators	Result
Workplace coaches engaged and workplace coach guide developed.	At least 85% of workplace coaches satisfied with training. Each learner has a prepared workplace coach as part of learner supports for course.	<p>20 coaches engaged in pilots. The project team encountered resistance with workplace pilot offerings in recruiting workplace coaches. Barriers identified were a concern that too much time was needed to task employees as workplace coaches despite creating clear coaching roles and limits on time for coaching (e.g. 30 minutes per week). In the pre-employment pilots, Bredin staff participated in this role.</p> <p>Coaches participating in end of pilot focus groups identified the benefits of reinforcing learner skills.</p> <p>“Many of our clients in the first pilot approached us for assistance and I think it helped because we had been through settlement.”</p> <p>“In the second and third pilots, they did not use the coaches as much. Many thought the materials were easy enough to figure out on their own.”</p> <p>“This was a very successful pilot.”</p> <p>“The coaches could be given more of the materials and sit in on the online session to know more about the content of the course.”</p>
Online Workplace Learning model is piloted with 3 cohorts of learners.	<p>At least 75% of all learners complete the course.</p> <p>At least 80% of learners completing the course show gains in professional language proficiency assessment tasks.</p> <p>At least 80% of learners show perceived gains in professional language proficiency based on self- and coach ratings of workplace language proficiency statements.</p>	<p>57% of learners, who started the course, completed all requirements.</p> <p>Note: completion was defined as participation in/completion of 80% of all possible activities. Reasons for learner attrition included changes in jobs such as obtaining full-time work, increased work assignments eliminating time for participation in course; deciding to return to full time ESL</p>

	<p>At least 80% of learners completing the course show progress along the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity continuum as measured by the IDI.</p>	<p>programming and challenges with technology.</p> <p>Learner professional language gains (oral and written language samples using pragmatics rubric) showed ½ or more band level of improvement for most learners.</p> <p>100% of learners who completed the post-course feedback questionnaire (n=15) agreed that learning using these online tools improved their ability to communicate.</p> <p>98% of participants said they would recommend this course to others</p> <p>70% indicated this course assisted them in learning about Canadian workplace culture.</p> <p>Participants showed slight increases in intercultural sensitivity with some indications of movement from Polarization to Minimization.</p> <p>Learner self-ratings included anecdotes of improved results when delegating tasks to teams, better team harmony, supervisors responding more favorable to input. See collection of learner feedback under heading, <i>Impact on Learner</i>.</p>
	<p>At least 500 readers receive information on project through news articles.</p> <p>At least 50 people attend knowledge sharing events.</p> <p>At least 60 ESL instructors attend conference presentations at ATESL and TESL Canada.</p> <p>Project website posted.</p> <p>1 television media piece developed in collaboration with Omni.</p>	<p>Articles submitted to following newsletters: Immigrant Initiatives, Information and Communications Technology Council; Human Capital – Winter 2013 edition on Diversity and Inclusion in the Workforce; SHARE, TESL Canada's e-magazine – 2013 edition; the Peg, APEGGA (Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta). 39 people registered for the events; 31 people attended.</p> <p>60 people attended presentations at ATESL and TESL Canada.</p> <p>Project website available on http://www.norquest.ca/norquest-</p>

		centres/centre-for-intercultural-education/projects.aspx No television media piece was developed. After discussions with Omni, recent changes in their operations rendered them unable to address this deliverable. Short video interviews with participants in the final focus group were created and are posted on the NorQuest Center for Intercultural education website.
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Lessons Learned

This section of the report outlines summaries of lessons learned from the Online Workplace Learning Model (learner support, impact on learners, role of instructor in facilitating learner success, e-learning expert reviewers' comments, considerations to apply the model, and suggestions to develop/adapt a course to online format).

Learner Support in Online Course

- It is important to have clear communication on the learner role and required skills to learn online (problem-solving, time management, computer literacy). Using the learner role and communication skills as part of the course instruction helped to reinforce required learner skills to learn online.
- Begin an online course with a short questionnaire related to learner motivation and goal setting. Learner engagement or the lack of it is perhaps more strongly linked to their goals and motivation to take an online course than in a face-to-face classroom environment. Assessing learner goals at the beginning of the course enables the instructor to more effectively link learning activities to learner goals.
- Ensure learners understand expectations of self-agency/autonomy in learning online. Each individual learner should be responsible for checking updates on assignments, keeping track of when Elluminate sessions occur and for inquiring in a timely manner about technical challenges accessing course materials. In addition, learners should be reminded that reading the course outline and the course objectives as well as module learning outcomes and content often will answer any questions they have about assessment, content or expectations. It is critical for workplace success that learners attend to their learning as if it were a job. For this reason, a group discussion either online or in a face-to-face setting to discuss roles and responsibilities is critical. In this project, the online course was approached as a third culture space, ie a place to talk about patterns of behavior, communication and expectations as a meta-cognitive component of the learning outcomes.
- Consider a multi-tiered learner support system. The first tier should include the instructor and/or the instructor's direct supervisor. The second tier should include tech support for learners. This tech support should include an email system and a guaranteed 24-hour

response time to technical issues with the course during the business week. This tiered system should be explained in a pre-course meeting to the instructor, supervisor and the tech support team by a leader in the organization.

- Encourage inter-learner support. Use a learning management system tool like the discussion board or announcement tool to create a space for learners to ask each other questions and trouble shoot potential solutions.
- Ensure that each learner receives a document clearly outlining online etiquette for course participation.
- Ensure that learners have the opportunity in written and spoken form to assess the course and give feedback on its efficacy. Wherever possible, learners might be asked to consider referencing their own learning goals from the outset of the course to evaluate their learning and course impact.

Impact on Learners

Online Conversation Management clearly had a positive impact on the majority of the learners who took the course and saw it through to completion. In our follow-up focus group sessions we gathered testimonials some of which we have captured in video and will be posted by the end of April, 2013 on our Centre website: <http://www.norquest.ca/norquest-centres/centre-for-intercultural-education.aspx>.

Learner responses:

- The way I communicate changed. I normally say things very directly, not the way “normal” Canadians do. Now before I ask, I include some small talk. In e-mail always send back within 30 minutes. Sometimes I would send back the next day.
- I did change. Before I didn’t use softeners. Usually I just jump in and now I should use some soft skills. Use some indirect ways. For example, I learned polite way to communicate, to interrupt, and to ask a question. I remember [the instructor] taught us how to deal with different situations.
- Interesting experience learning to differentiate between different cultures. I learned a lot about Canadian culture. I have been here for 12 years but learned a lot. My first thought was that this was only a conversation course with no assignments. It was tough because lots of assignments like a college course. IT was hard at first because I didn’t expect that and I was very busy.
- It definitely gave me a different perspective about communication – I stop to think, analyze before I answer. Looking back, I realize I was very rude, it’s not intentional, but it’s cultural and how you’ve lived all these years. Class gave me an impression about how people communicate in a better way, to get a better response from others.
- I can’t say that my culture is very different than Canadians – but [this course] helps me to understand – people have different accents – helps me to understand them online – to help get used to way people speak with different accents.
- After this course I connect differently with everyone. People didn’t tell me my behavior changed. I learned how to achieve my goals better. For example to get a day off don’t ask direct

Learner feedback questionnaires were administered during a post-course focus group. Participants were asked questions about the efficacy use of the BlackBoard learning system and the accompanying

Elluminate Live online virtual classroom. All of the learners who completed the questionnaire (n=15) agreed that learning using these online tools improved their ability to communicate. Over two-thirds (98%) of participants said they would recommend this course to others and over half 70% indicated that this course assisted them in learning about Canadian workplace culture.

Role of Instructor in Facilitating Learner Success

The following practices were deemed successful by the instructor(s) of Online Conversation Management:

- Facilitate a face-to-face orientation session to introduce learning management system, complete pre-assessments, articulate course objectives and expectations of learners, and to answer any learner questions.
- If using an online virtual classroom like Elluminate Live (now called BlackBoard Collaborate), ensure that all learners have proper headsets and microphones. Make these available for sale at the orientation session or even make a certain type mandatory. Otherwise, many may not be able to participate in online class discussions and group work which is critical to expanding communication skills and intercultural sensitivity.
- Be patient. It took an average of 4 modules for learners to gain fluency with the learning management system and to complete all assignments and activities on time.
- Use the tools in the online virtual classroom to ensure learner engagement. The instructor for this course found it critical to use the emoticon, hand-raising and chat functions on the Elluminate screen to ensure learner engagement. This involved reminding learners to use emoticons, "Let me know that you are following me by clicking on your smiley face," or "For the next 3 minutes, I'd like you all to use the chat box as I discuss this concept to agree, disagree, share ideas or simply to say "yes" or "no". This way we can all be connected to the content.
- Use incidental instruction, "teachable moments" to create short assignments. As with any course, there was an abundance of teachable moments about culture or language use. In one instance a learner was explaining in an Elluminate session the challenges she was having in getting her boss to give her the details she needed to complete a report. She had asked a number of times but her boss had not replied. The instructor then assigned each learner to write an email to a fictitious boss asking for these important details. The class responded within one hour of the end of the Elluminate session. The instructor then gave individualized feedback on the email responses. This case study analysis of learner experiences continued for the duration of the course.

E-Learning Expert Comments on the Course

What follow are direct quotes from each of the two course reviewers. Reviewers were asked to use the Government of Alberta publication, Building skills and expertise for using e-learning with adult ESL learners⁹ as a framework for their course review.

Reviewer 1:

I found the course to be thoughtfully designed with careful consideration of the elements

⁹ Light, J. (2010). Building skills and expertise for using e-learning with adult ESL learners. Edmonton: Government of Alberta

Related to intercultural content and pragmatics content. I anticipate that this online course could operate as an effective language-learning environment for participants. It offers an excellent range of learning objects, including: audio, video, text, discussion boards and assignments. These learning objects offer a range of learning opportunities, appealing to a broad set of learning styles and engaging learners in interactive and thought-provoking activities. The module outcomes are clearly aligned with the tasks and assessment tools in each module. There is an opportunity for teacher presence and cognitive presence within this online course that are both vital to language development and intercultural learning to take place.¹

Reviewer 2:

Attractive and useful visuals used throughout the course. I appreciated having the design repeated with the relevant topics highlighted; it helps to tie the course together and to stay focused. Learning activities are clearly designed to help students reach the identified learning objectives.

In addition to the positive comments about the course, reviewers gave constructive feedback that the project team was able to incorporate into the revision stage prior to Pilots 3 and 4. Table 3 highlights both the challenges and the way in which they were addressed.

Table 3: Summary of Course Challenges Listed by Course Reviewers and How Addressed

Challenges	How Addressed
This course simply starts. There is not a great deal of scaffolding of learners to either explain how the overall course will look, what the expectations will be for learners to complete the course assignments nor the time it is likely to take. Orientation materials provided to learners can bridge them into the online context and allay their concerns about what to expect from this potentially novel learning environment. These materials could also contain information about what to do during technical glitches.	Additional orientation materials were provided to participants in the form of an orientation module and an extra orientation delivered in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment. This resulted in improved navigation of the course content and technology and allowed learners to meet the instructor in person to ask any question they may have about studying online.
I see some effort to build a community among the class members but this could be improved. The use of the discussion board generally does not require true discussion and interaction. It is used mostly to share an answer with the class. Responses are required but are not defined and are not likely to stimulate much back and forth. Activities do not require the learners to work together toward a common goal. One strategy might be to incorporate a 'social' discussion area where students introduce themselves at the beginning of the course and where they can relate to each other on non-course topics, or to find partners for activities. Providing a 'help' forum where students can answer each other's questions is another way to promote a community feeling.	For pilots 3 and 4, emphasis was given to discussion board participation for introductions and a place to ask questions. During the orientation sessions for the pilots, course participants practiced their discussion board postings from Day 1 with introductions and responses to each other. The result was a stronger class dynamic. In addition, during the online virtual classroom sessions, the course instructor allowed for 10 minutes at the start of class for general questions, greetings, comments and stories about experiences with culture from that week. This assisted in class engagement and helped learners co-construct the learning space online.

Considerations to Apply the Online Workplace Learning Model

- Important to work with an instructional design to create the template for the online course – this process was essential to translate face-to-face instructional and learning activities to work effectively in an online course environment.
- Important to focus on the skill and knowledge development for the learner to meet course outcomes – in pilots, were able to incorporate learner roles in learning online as practice activities to support communication outcomes for the course.
- Important to test newly developed online course and make minor revisions to the design to work effectively (3-pilot model recommended).
- Important for designer and instructor to have knowledge of current research on e-learning and to have a solid working knowledge of current technological advances in online learning tools.
- Critical to employ e-learning experts as course reviewers.
- Compare assessment tools and techniques to existing literature to ensure validity and reliability.
- Use validated instruments wherever possible (e.g., Intercultural Development Inventory) to compare pre and post course learner results.

Suggestions to Develop/Adapt an Online ESL Course

First and foremost, instructors should have access to the Government of Alberta publication, *Building skills and expertise for using e-learning with adult ESL learners*. The instructor(s) for Online Conversation Management used this document as a guideline of practice. Many of the following elements were adapted from this document and found critical to course success over the four pilots:

- Learn and become fluent with the learning management system being used for instruction.
- Be an active part of the course development process.
- Wherever possible, be interactive. Over the four pilots, the instructor employed increasingly more interactive engagement in course materials and additional opportunities to practice communication content covered in the course in a variety of scenarios. Be careful not to overextend as an instructor, however. It is possible to commit so much time to feedback and increased opportunities for practice that other areas of the course may suffer.
- Monitor student participation. There is a tool in many learning management systems that will allow student activity tracking. If learners are not participating as per the course requirements, it is critical that the instructor or department representative be in contact with the learner to encourage participation. Once learners get more than a week behind the cohort, attrition is likely to occur.
- Summarize weekly learning outcomes achieved and areas for improvement. This general form of feedback can be given in a more individualized way to each learner on a monthly basis if it fits within course parameters.
- Join an online teaching community for support as an online instructor. As with teaching in a face-to-face setting, it is critical to have opportunities for collaboration and to share experience.
- Consider presenting some of your ideas at a local area ESL teaching community meeting or conference.

References

See project website for annotated bibliography of references used to inform the project.

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 or 780-644-6770