

# Getting Online: A real-life research survival story

by Deborah Morgan

■ *Getting Online: Distance Education Promising Practices for Canadian Literacy Practitioners* (or the GO Project for short) is a two-year national project designed to research trends, technologies and promising practices in online and distance learning in the field of literacy in Canada. How the GO Project came to be a national undertaking is a good “pan-Canadian” literacy story.

I like the national perspective. Often, literacy is more regional and this is a great chance to learn about the bigger national picture. I am most looking forward to the research results and learning how people are using online learning and what they perceive the barriers to be. (Dr. Pat Fahy)

In the spring of 2005, Diana Twiss and I approached what was then the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) about this project idea because we were having great success with teaching the Writing Out Loud Instructor Training online and were curious to know how or if others were using distance learning. Yvette Souque, now-retired NLS project manager, suggested that we get in touch with Joanne Kaattari and Vicki Trottier from Community Literacy of Ontario, as they had a strong history of online training development and delivery.

Diana and I started emailing Joanne and Vicki over the summer, sharing ideas and insights about the literacy communities in our regions—Diana in British Columbia, me in Alberta, Vicki in Northern Ontario and Joanne in Central Ontario. When the opportunity presented itself to meet face to face at the Provincial Literacy Conference in Alberta in November 2005, we were excited about furthering our discussions about a research project that would explore the use and value of distance learning in the literacy field.

We spent the first part of the meeting getting to know each other. The four of us had extensive experience in literacy and in working/learning online, but could we actually do this together? Did we share the same values about and interest in literacy and adult education? What roles would we each play? Did we really have the time to commit to such an undertaking? Hard questions, but after a day of talking, sharing meals and visioning about the future, we decided that, yes, we could (and very much wanted) to take on this project together, as a team.

I love the cross-Canada team of literacy-based researchers/writers/facilitators we have put together for the GO Project. Our different backgrounds and experience give the project a richness and validity that I find quite irresistible. Collaborating with this dynamic team is really productive, stimulating—and fun! (Deborah Morgan)

Following our face-to-face meeting, we continued to work from a distance, relying on First Class conferencing software and the occasional teleconference to design and write the Getting Online Project proposal. One of our biggest obstacles was finding an organization that would host the project grant money. We were very grateful when Athabasca University agreed to handle the finances, and especially pleased when Dr. Pat Fahy, a professor with the university’s Centre for Distance Education, expressed an interest in playing a university liaison and advisory role with the GO Project. During that time, we also asked Lynn Best from Newfoundland to join the team. Having just completed her masters in adult education through an online program at St. Francis Xavier University, Lynn added an Eastern Canada perspective, making the project a truly national one.

In May 2006, after five months of consultations with Yvette at the NLS, discussions with local literacy practitioners and writing and rewriting our project ideas, the proposal for the Getting Online Project was submitted to the National Literacy Secretariat in Ottawa.

The next 12 months were a roller coaster for the literacy community in Canada. It seemed that everything was put on hold awaiting federal election results. Following the eventual change from a Liberal to Conservative government, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development restructured departments (the National Literacy Secretariat became the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills), reappointed staff and then made the unexpected announcement of budget cuts to literacy.

During that year, we didn’t give up or dissolve the team we had assembled for the GO Project. With the commitment and tenacity typical of literacy workers, we continued to talk online about the project and the need to find ways for those in the field to access training and support, especially given the reality of

decreased funding for literacy initiatives, such as conferences and regional meetings. We supported each other through the frustrating months of change and uncertainty, so when the GO Project was finally approved in May 2007, we were an even stronger team, even more convinced that the goals of the GO Project were important and timely.

Now, eight months into the project, we are learning and growing on a daily basis, and are pleased with how the project goals and objectives are playing out.

I have enjoyed having conversations with literacy workers in Canada and learning about the amazing things that are happening in literacy across this country. For me, this research is a chance to learn, reflect and share what is happening in online learning in the literacy field with people who are hungry for that information. It is an exciting project and I am learning way more than I ever thought I would! (Diana Twiss)

The details of the project were well thought out. Having worked on collaborative research projects before, we recognized that we would need face-to-face team meetings, as well as computer-mediated communication, so we budgeted for three meetings over the two years of the project. These gatherings are key to the continuity and consistency of the work we are doing individually and collectively, especially given the vast geographic distances over which the GO team is working. After all, our project researchers are spread out from Newfoundland to British Columbia! This valuable time is used to carve out timelines, assign responsibilities, develop protocols (such as an online survey) and strategize how best to gather and analyze data.

We are now divided into two smaller teams: an external team to research the use of online learning in related fields and an internal team to research what is happening in relation to online learning in the Canadian literacy field.

The GO Project has allowed me to meet some wonderful new people, both in person and virtually. It has provided me with an opportunity to explore the many exciting and innovative ways that organizations, large and small, are involved in e-learning in every province and territory in Canada, as well as internationally. (Vicki Trottier)

This project has been an exciting opportunity to explore distance education with the literacy community. It's been really interesting to note the keen interest that people have in learning more about using online and distance learning technology for professional development. (Lynn Best)

Even though we are working as two teams, there is considerable crossover between the two. As an example, when one member from each team wrote a piece on methodology for the research report, they relied on each others' ideas and feedback during the process. Similarly, one member from each team has been analyzing the data collected using AtlasTi software. These team members have worked closely to learn how to use the software while sharing newly discovered tricks and shortcuts with each other.

Another tool we use to keep us on track is a monthly meeting using a learning management system called Elluminate. These meetings allow us to get caught up with each other, maintain the energy and direction of the project and share concerns and problems that might be better dealt with through real-time discussion than a written email.

With the frustrations of the initial project approval and start-up well behind us, we are really excited to be at the stage where we are hearing and learning about success stories and struggles that other folks are experiencing as they try to figure out this technology and make it work for them.

We are looking forward to each stage of the research, but most of all to the time when we will share the GO Project findings with the Canadian literacy community.

I'm so thrilled to be researching all of the many ways online learning is allowing people to more easily access training at times convenient to them. It feels like a 'brave new world' where people can more easily learn and share across vast distances and more easily access needed training and resources. (Joanne Kaattari) ■

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