

## An online communications and information environment for facilitators of adult education programs at Brock University

### Opportunity

The Centre for Adult Education and Community Outreach (CAECO) in the Faculty of Education at Brock University in St. Catharines offers part-time programs leading to a Bachelor of Education in Adult Education and a Certificate in Adult Education. Students may take the courses online or face-to-face at venues throughout Ontario.

Faculty members develop a detailed curriculum for each course and supervise part-time facilitators who lead the courses on-site and online. In response to a need to connect, motivate, and support a widely-dispersed network of facilitators across the province, as well as support standardization and quality of the courses, CAECO created an online facilitator environment.



Faculty of Education

Centre for Adult Education and Community Outreach

### Innovation

The online facilitator environment is an indispensable innovation that serves as a learning network for a community of practice which is essential to the unique staffing and curricular structure of the adult education programs. Student learning is enhanced as all facilitators have access to the wide range of experience and perspectives of their colleagues, which augments their breadth of knowledge and teaching ability.

Staffing: Facilitators in the adult education degree and certificate programs bring extensive workplace experience and demonstrated academic credentials. This pairing of scholarly knowledge and theory with practical know-how is an essential combination, meeting the needs and interests of students. Consistent with theories of adult education, facilitators work as colleagues and peers with both online cohorts and small groups of students at host institutions around the province to complete the prescribed curriculum in each course. There may be between 40 and 48 facilitators at any one time leading courses online or in person at more than 20 Ontario locations. The online facilitator environment is the communications link that allows the sharing of practice, knowledge and mutual support among the facilitators and with the faculty.

Curriculum: Professor Candace Figg, the Interim Director of CAECO, describes the curriculum for the adult education courses, available online for students and facilitators alike, as a rigorous learning experience that includes activities, discussion points, assignments, and readings linked to learning objectives. Faculty as well as subject experts, supervised by faculty, design the curriculum. Facilitators then provide consistent delivery of courses across the province. This consistency is critical in ensuring the quality of the on-site courses and also serves as the framework for the online courses. The course facilitators bring the content to life by helping to make it applicable to specific situations, and in this, they are supported through the resources and connections available in the online facilitator environment.

Online Facilitator Environment: Through the online community of practice, facilitators remain current and connected with each other and faculty. The online environment serves as a communications and support network. Within this environment, facilitators participate in discussion forums on topics of common interest and connect with Brock University faculty members who provide curriculum and pedagogical support. Also, they are able to access announcements, links to research and literature, and other sources of curriculum information. The facilitators can take part in the evolving curriculum changes and view new elective courses. Despite their geographic separation, the online community allows facilitators to contribute to course development and to the quality of teaching across the province.

## **Outcomes and Benefits**

Facilitator access to the online environment results in enhanced learning for the students featuring best practices in adult education, current theory and trends, and the collective experience of facilitators and faculty.

Facilitators come from diverse workplace backgrounds, including health care, business, the military, non-profit organizations, and post-secondary education. Through the environment, they form a community of practice to share this varied experience and support each other in meeting the learning needs of students from equally diverse backgrounds.

The online facilitator environment contributes to the high retention rates for the part-time facilitators. Even when they are not leading a course, facilitators can access the site to check on developments and assess their interest in teaching upcoming courses.

The experience that facilitators gain through participating in the online facilitator environment gives them the competencies and confidence to lead online courses.

Through access to the full curriculum for all the adult education courses, facilitators can explore what the previous learning of the students has been and, as a result, link past and current learning, consistent with the adult education principle of building on what the student knows.

## Challenges and Enhancements

The challenges in maintaining the online facilitator environment are similar to those associated with offering the courses and are particularly tied to currency – keeping both the technology, curriculum, and resources up to date, as theory, practice, technological capacities, and student demands evolve.

According to Sandra Plavinskis, the Administrative Director for CAECO, an ongoing challenge is making the online courses more interactive. To this point, online courses have been largely text-based to convey information and to host online discussions rather than geared to student activity through interactive learning objects and tools. This enhanced level of interactivity requires facilitators to develop additional skills for online instruction. The acquisition of these skills must be supported through the online facilitator environment.

## Potential

CAECO is currently exploring the possibilities of making the program international by inviting students from China, Vietnam, and other countries.

Both Sandra Plavinskis and Candace Figg expressed willingness to share the ideas and structure of the facilitator environment with other post-secondary institutions in Ontario.

## For Further Information

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