

Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society: "Technology and Personal Skills"

Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

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The DWLES Project

Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society's (FNCLS) "Technology and Personal Skills" beta test was part of the Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills (DWLES) project, which was a collaborative project that was managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda) and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Learning Metrix.

The overall goal of the DWLES project was to better understand how literacy organizations can support hard-to-reach remote and rural communities by integrating literacy and essential skills (LES) and employment services for a range of displaced workers, with a particular focus on equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, people with disabilities, and others. The project began in 2019 and beta-testing was done in 2021 and 2022.

The project began with 10 literacy organizations in British Columbia (BC) being selected to be part of the data collection phase of the project. This included a literature review, interviews with the BC literacy organizations, focus groups with key stakeholders, and a survey and interviews with displaced workers in each of the 10 communities.

Following the completion of this background research, 11 literacy organizations across Canada—including 7 from the earlier phase—were selected for the beta-test phase of the project, which included implementing and evaluating projects that integrated LES and employment services targeted for displaced workers in their communities.

The purpose of the beta-test phase was to uncover and disseminate evidence-based LES support, training models, and promising practices to inform development of programs and models to improve the employability of displaced workers across Canada. The beta-test projects can be viewed as trial or experimental interventions, and thus were intended to be small in terms of the numbers of learners, with the potential to be scaled up to a full pilot study if deemed successful.

The following report provides an overview of the beta test "Technology and Personal Skills project" that was implemented in Fort Nelson, British Columbia by FNCLS.

Fort Nelson, BC

Fort Nelson is a small, remote community along the Alaska Highway in northeastern BC with a population of approximately 3,500. Fort Nelson sits on the traditional territory of the Dene people and is home to many First Nations and Metis people and communities. The area includes Fort Nelson First Nation and the neighbouring Prophet River First Nation. It is a four-hour drive from Fort St. John, which is the closest urban centre.

The town has been in steady economic decline for the past twelve years, largely as a result of the initial closure of two main lumber mills and the continuing decline of the oil and gas industry. It has shrunk in population by about 50 per cent and has seen many social and community issues arise as a result of the poor economy.

FNCLS is a non-profit organization devoted to lifelong learning. FNCLS promotes learning through tutoring, workshops, community learning events, capacity development, social development and community development.

With a new pellet plant being built, Fort Nelson is seeing the first sign of economic activity in over a decade. FNCLS recognized that with these new job opportunities, there is a need to prepare and to support potential workers using a more holistic approach. This involved



supporting learners in developing traditional job search, interview and job readiness skills, but also social-emotional skills such as mindfulness, personal development, and self-worth. This led FNCLS to develop the Technology and Personal Skills (TPS) beta test project.

Technology and Personal Skills

The TPS project addressed the whole learner. It focused on job preparedness and personal learning, offering digital literacy training, employment skills, and workplace safety tickets. There was also dedicated time spent on social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and personal development for healing and self worth. The project addressed not only practical skills and training, but the foundational issues that often hold individuals back in their pursuits. The project was holistic and individualized; it was a blend of a learner-centred approach and small group training that touches on all aspects of learners' needs.

In May 2021, the TPS project was delivered in-person over six weeks. Each week learners were in class for two days, four hours per day. Ten learners completed the training. The number of learners was kept low due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the experimental nature of the project.



Highlights from the TPS Project

There were several highlights that were identified by learners and staff about the TPS project:

* Many learners that obtained certifications (e.g., First Aid, WHMIS, H2S for oil and gas) through TPS **ended up becoming employed in jobs that required these credentials**. Thus, the opportunity to obtain certifications contributed to some of the learners' positive employment outcomes.

* The digital skills component of the program **helped learners feel more confident in using computers**, both personally and professionally. This was the case even for learners who were seeking jobs that did not require strong digital skills. These learners still valued the focus on digital skills because they needed them to search and apply for jobs and connect and communicate with potential employers over email.

* The **social aspect of the program was particularly important to learners**, as it was held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic when many people were socially isolated. The program provided learners not only an opportunity to build their skills, but to work with other learners, hear about each other's experiences, and develop a sense of community. This was consistent with findings of many of the other DWLES beta-test projects.

* TPS's **focus on personal development and mental health was a positive** experience for learners (see box below).



One learner gained the confidence to make a significant change to pursue a career that they were passionate about and were still working in this career area at the time of writing this report.

Many learners described how the mental health component of the course helped support their personal growth. They felt that learning about the following areas was particularly impactful: 1) self-acceptance, 2) being empathetic towards others, and 3) becoming more self-aware of their emotional reactions to different situations.

Promising practices from TPS

There were several promising practices that emerged from the TPS project that strengthened learner engagement while supporting their personal growth and building their LES and job search skills.



Providing incentives.

FNCLS provided incentives to learners to help recruit participants and encourage learners to complete the training. This included providing learners with lunch each day, giving grocery or restaurant gift cards to learners who attended all

of the classes, and paying for learners' workforce certification exams. All but one learner completed the training.



Using a holistic approach.

The TPS project was designed in a holistic way so that learners could develop their digital skills, work towards their personal growth, and obtain certifications required for jobs available in Fort Nelson. With this holistic approach, learners were able to access a number of different training topics in one course.



Responding to learner feedback.

After receiving feedback from learners that they were interested and needed additional time to develop and apply their digital skills, FNCLS offered additional time beyond the 6-week course for learners to practice. This not only gave learners the opportunity to continue to build their skills, but also to remain connected with FNCLS upon completing the training.



Leveraging existing partnerships.

Prior to the DWLES project, WorkBC clients would be informed about FNCLS programming and this continued with the TPS project. Many of the learners were recruited through this relationship, strengthening the connection between FNCLS and WorkBC.

What we learned from TPS

1

Funding opportunities that aim to foster innovation and flexibility allow small, non-profit literacy organizations to expand their program offerings in order to increase learner engagement.

Being involved in the DWLES project provided an opportunity for FNCLS to expand their programming and engage learners in more long-term training. Training previously offered by FNCLS was mostly one-off events or workshops where they would only have one interaction with learners. The DWLES project funding enabled them to engage with learners over a longer period of time.

2

Literacy practitioners know the needs of their communities, and research can help validate this knowledge to further their work.

Like many of the organizations involved in the DWLES project, the staff at FNCLS have strong connections to their community, and therefore, have a deep understanding of the needs, gaps, and resources available in their community. Most of this knowledge is anecdotal and comes from their work on-the-ground and their regular interactions with community members. Being part of the DWLES project provided an opportunity for FNCLS to validate their organizational knowledge of community needs with evidence from the evaluation, as well as to use the research outputs and learnings to further their work.

3 Addressing learners' mental health is critical for the success of LES programs.

Mental health issues are not commonly addressed in LES training and education programs. FNCLS staff learned, however, that issues related to mental health can pose significant barriers for displaced workers in seeking and obtaining employment. Addressing mental health concerns and helping learners develop strategies to improve their mental health, was, therefore, a priority for the TPS project. A smaller class size was particularly helpful in fostering a safe and supportive environment for learners to discuss more personal topics, such as mental health.

Additional project information

This report is part of a series of 11 individual beta test reports developed for the DWLES project. To learn more about the DWLES project and to access project reports, please visit: decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing.

