

# Campbell River Literacy Association: "Shaping the Future"

## Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Beta Test Report | February 2023

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## The DWLES Project

Campbell River Literacy Association's (CRLA) "Shaping the Future of a Rural Community through Improved Access to Technology" (Shaping the Future) 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 Shaping the Future that was implemented in Gold River, British Columbia by Campbell River Literacy Association (CRLA).

## Gold River, BC

Located on Vancouver Island, 88 km northwest of Campbell River and at the end of the pavement of Highway 28, there is a beautiful town called Gold River. Gold River is a rural and remote community with a shrinking population of about 1,500. The community lies in the traditional Nootka Sound territories of the Nuu-chah-nulth nations of the Mowachaht and Muchalaht people and hosts the village site of Tsa 'Xana. The lands and waters surrounding the community are rich and abundant, and much of this part of Vancouver Island remains wild and untouched.

Gold River was a designed community built specifically in the late 1950's to mid 1960's to attract employees and their families to work at the newly built pulp mill. Prior to this development, industry in Nootka Sound was primarily focused in Tahsis – another community 75 kilometres further northwest. Although sportfishing has become a key economic driver over the last two decades, year-round industry still relies heavily on forestry and the businesses that support it. The closure of the Pulp Mill in October 1998, required Gold River to focus on rebuilding the community, attracting new residents, and diversifying the town's economy to continue to thrive in its significantly rural and remote locale.

Historically, there has been limited capacity within the community to provide training options



for citizens needing to pivot their employment to continue living in the community. The town only very recently received access to high-speed Internet (2020), opening some opportunity for regional facilitators to provide online learning and programming. The Campbell River Literacy Association (CRLA) leveraged funding through the DWLES project to pilot a foundational tech literacy program in support of building the community's capacity and knowledge around digital technologies and learning.

As the largest community literacy organization on Northern Vancouver Island the CRLA often finds itself playing a role in regional program delivery. Existing relationships allowed the CRLA to team with the Gold River Literacy Society in developing the Shaping the Future project. In doing so, the project met multiple needs: it strengthened Gold River's capacity to offer public computer and internet access through the local literacy group, created online training opportunities for adults within the community, built connection points for other regional service providers such as WorkBC and North Island College, and allowed for a deeper dive into understanding the unique challenges and inequities faced by those living in rural and remote Canadian towns and villages.



## Shaping the Future

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The Shaping the Future project established a community technology/learning hub for the residents of Gold River and surrounding areas. The project involved four steps. First, IT hardware, reliable Internet access and accessible space within the community needed to be identified and secured. The second component, and arguably the most challenging, was recruitment in a community with no media outlets and limited wireless access, so recruitment occurred by messaging via word of mouth, public bulletin boards, and direct personal invitations. Thirdly was instruction in basic beginner tech literacy with participants arriving with different experience levels. Finally, due to the pandemic, all outside organizations scheduled to facilitate were required to present virtually, which was a challenge due to the bandwidth of the internet service provider.

The program was delivered in-person over two cohorts in the spring and fall of 2021. Each cohort occurred over seven weeks, with one evening class per week. Six learners completed the training with five others dropping in on an irregular basis. The number of learners was intentionally kept low due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the experimental nature of the project.

## Highlights from Shaping the Future

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

✳ This beta test project **helped learners become more confident in their digital skills**. Some learners entered the training not wanting to use a computer, or not knowing how to use one, because they were too scared to try. The relationships developed amongst the learners throughout the training helped them to understand that they are not alone in their struggles learning IT. The training took the fear and mystery out of technology and offered a supportive environment for them to learn.

✳ Shaping the Future provided an opportunity for the **Campbell River and the Gold River Literacy Societies to strengthen their connection into a more formal partnership**. The CRLA lead provided overall project management and expertise in literacy training, and the Gold River Literacy Society provided space for the technology hub and a broader knowledge and understanding of community needs.

✳ Participation in the training **helped learners strengthen their connections to each other through shared experience**. Many of the learners knew of each other prior to the training, but were not closely connected. The beta test brought them together, many of whom shared similar interests, where they could get to know each other and share their experiences. The relationship-building and socializing aspects of the training helped learners build a sense of community, and therefore, feel comfortable discussing more sensitive topics, such as job satisfaction, skills gaps and strengths, and personal goals.

## Promising practices from Shaping the Future

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

### **Adapting course content to meet learner needs.**

While the facilitator had a plan each week for the course, they were also responsive to the group's interests and needs. For example, the training was originally going to use Microsoft Office applications; however, many of the learners did not have access to these applications outside of the training and therefore did not use them. As a result, the facilitator changed the training to focus on the Google Suite, so that learners could build their skills in more practical applications.

### **The potential long-term benefits of establishing a community-based IT/learning hub.**

The establishment of the IT/learning hub not only benefited the particular learners involved in the beta test project, but will also continue to support the IT needs of the residents of Gold River in the future. It allows the Gold River Literacy Society to continue delivering IT literacy training and it also provides residents with a space to access other online learning opportunities.

### **Partnering with a local organization to support recruitment.**

Partnering with the Gold River Literacy Society was essential for recruiting learners for the beta test. The CRLA had limited connections within the Gold River community and the village does not have many advertising streams (e.g., local radio or newspaper) to support recruitment. Staff at the Gold River Literacy Society were from the community, understood the best ways to do outreach, and introduced CRLA staff to learners. Partnering with a local community-based organization was critical for the success of CRLA's beta test project.

## What we learned from Shaping the Future

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### **1 In addition to building capacity related to service provision, supplying physical resources, such as computers and other IT, can increase access to LES services in remote communities with limited resources.**

Gold River is a very remote community that had limited internet and technology access, with no high-speed internet in the community and no cell service until early 2020. This made it challenging for residents to take advantage of a variety of virtual services and training, including those focused on LES and employment. Local in-person opportunities for training were also very limited, due to the small and remote nature of the community. These technology and

infrastructure inequities were further increased during the COVID-19 pandemic when many programs and services shifted to online. CRLA's beta test increased access to IT in the community, as well as provided the opportunity for learners to take part in virtual programming and build their digital skills.

## **2 Literacy practitioners know the needs of the communities they work with, and research can help validate and build on this knowledge to further their work.**

The staff at CRLA and the Gold River Literacy Society were well aware of the technology challenges that residents in Gold River face. Being part of the DWLES research project provided an opportunity for CRLA to design, implement, and evaluate a model for addressing community access to and skills in IT. This helped CRLA to better understand the challenges experienced in the community, as well as to use the research outputs and learnings to further their work.

## **3 Opportunities for new partnerships can emerge through the development of relationships.**

CRLA developed a new relationship with the Tsa'Xana First Nation as a result of the beta test. This new relationship sparked partnerships and collaboration focused on strengthening the technology skills of community members and the grant writing capacity of the First Nation leadership. Gold River Literacy Society also developed a stronger relationship with the Tsa'Xana First Nation, with hope that this new connection will lead to further collaboration.

### **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](https://decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing).

