



Digital Technology Snapshot of the Literacy and Essential Skills Field 2013

Summary Report

Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN)

Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN), a non-profit charitable organization, represents literacy coalitions, organizations and individuals in every province and territory in Canada. It is funded by the Government of Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES). CLLN is the national hub for research, information and knowledge mobilization. The organization believes that literacy and learning should be valued – at home, in the workplace and in the community. It is proud to be an integral part of a diverse and dynamic national network of provincial and territorial literacy and essential skills organizations. Collectively, through this network, CLLN raises awareness of the importance of literacy and essential skills with stakeholders and partners. It promotes accessible literacy and essential skills programs for all who need them; collaborates with others in order to support lifelong learning; and finds solutions. It makes connections to maximize resources and minimize duplication, provide leadership, and facilitate collaboration, research, and professional development for the field of literacy and essential skills.

Digital Technology Snapshot of the Literacy and Essential Skills Field 2013

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Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2013

ISBN xxx-x-xxxxxx-x



CLLN is funded by the Government of Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills.

Canada

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Purpose and Scope

From January to March 2013, CLLN conducted a snapshot to provide information about how digital technology tools are being used in the Literacy and Essential Skills (L/ES) field. The snapshot focused primarily on digital tools and activities that meet the organizational needs of provincial and territorial adult literacy coalitions, but it also reflects the information collected from a variety of Literacy and Essential Skills networks and frontline delivery programs¹ across Canada.

In this snapshot CLLN looked at digital technology as used by two groups with quite different perspectives: support agencies and frontline delivery agencies. Many coalitions and networks do not work directly with learners, and so interviews were also held with a small sample of organizations working directly with learners.

All thirteen provincial and territorial coalitions participated, together with two networks, staff from fourteen frontline delivery programs and one government department. The information provided represents a cross-sectoral snapshot of the use of digital technology in the literacy field. These key informants had a wealth of knowledge to share, and their feedback is a critical component of this report. Eventually, this information will be compared to the information being collected in a joint Canadian Apprenticeship Forum and CLLN project to ascertain employers' perspectives of the impacts of technology on labourer, apprentice and journey person skills requirements in the workplace.

Through the Digital Technology Snapshot CLLN aimed to discover what types of technology and tools are being used, how they are being used, what L/ES staff would like to be able to use digital technology for in the future, and any barriers they face to the full integration of digital technology. For the purposes of this snapshot, we defined digital technology as the broad range of tools (computers, SmartBoards, tablets, cell phones, smart phones and other mobile devices) as well as the software, applications and websites that are used with these tools, both online and offline.

CLLN believes the information gathered in this snapshot allows us to better focus our efforts on research and activities related to the use of digital tools that best meet the needs of Literacy and Essential Skills organizations, organizations that deliver Literacy and Essential Skills training and Canadian adult learners.

Methodology

At the start of the project, a questionnaire was developed to be used as a guide during key informant interviews or for use as an online survey.

Executive directors from provincial and territorial literacy coalitions participated in key informant interviews. They also provided the names of other potential participants from a variety of sectors within the L/ES field.

Information from the interviews and online questionnaire responses was compiled. The report you are reading presents the findings.

¹ Frontline delivery programs are those that teach Literacy and Essential Skills

Key Informant Interviews

Six questions were asked on the questionnaire and during the key informant interviews. Basic demographic data was also collected. The questions used are presented in Appendix 1.

In total, 60 agencies / individuals were contacted. From this list, 25 key informant interviews were held, and five completed questionnaires were received.²

Although only a small sample of literacy practitioners across Canada were interviewed, they provided a wealth of knowledge as to the types of technology being used, how it is being used and the ways in which they would like to use it. It can be seen that a wide variety of types of technology are being used in literacy support organizations and delivery agencies across the country.

Findings from the Key Informant Interviews

All interviewees use digital technology for administration, communications and networking purposes, although they are using many different programs and platforms. Digital technology is commonly used to deliver professional development for staff. Webinars were the most popular option for accessing professional development across the country. Interviewees also mentioned their participation in online courses. A number of specific platforms are being used to

create online professional development opportunities, including GoToWebinar, Adobe Connect, Moodle, Skype, Blackboard Collaborate, Elluminate, Centra, Camtasia, WebCT³ and WebEx. Other types of technology used to create and deliver professional development opportunities included Facetime, Google Hangouts and desktop sharing. Two print-based resources were noted: eBulletins and PDFs.

While we had expected to find that connectivity was not a major issue, it is clear that for remote areas this is still a considerable problem. Lack of broadband connections means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to stream videos. This makes webinar delivery (beyond basic audio feed) a hit-or-miss adventure. In certain parts of the country, the integration of digital resources into programming and training is severely curtailed by connectivity issues. This will need to be addressed if there is to be parity in the delivery of L/ES services.

Mobile technology has become a key resource for Literacy and Essential Skills organizations where staff members are regularly out of the office. The use of smart phones and tablet computers allow staff to access email and documents while working from a variety of locations. In the classroom, mobile devices often belong to the learners; programs are reluctant to provide mobile devices as it is difficult to prevent theft. Gradually, educators are beginning to find ways to incorporate the use of mobile devices such as cell

² One respondent provided both a written questionnaire and a key informant interview for a total of 29 individual responses.

³ WebCT is now owned by Blackboard.

phones, but there are still some pockets of resistance. In one instance a provincial ministry has recommended that programs avoid social media. Nevertheless, mobile technology is becoming more and more integrated into everyday use, and learners will most likely need to deal with it in the workplace. Programs need to consider how to use mobile technology to best advantage by integrating its use into learning programs. Examples provided included use of iPads as eReaders and smart phones as dictionaries or calculators. In Quebec, a grant was given to supply all its learning centres with iPads. Generally, interviewees were keen to have more iPads in the classroom. They are also eager to have more relevant apps. The observations from the snapshot suggest that ways to incorporate mobile technology into classroom use is a topic for future exploration.

SmartBoards are playing a role in both teaching and non-teaching environments. They are used in meetings to share information and educators use them to share information with their learners. However, interviewees mentioned that SmartBoards are generally under-utilized because users require training and additional practice to be able to maximize their full potential.

It can be seen that there is a move among Literacy and Essential Skills educators to embed digital tools into program delivery within the entire range of skill development so that it becomes an integrated activity for learners. We see this as a very positive move. Educators are looking for more resources delivered using asynchronous tools and more blended learning opportunities. They would also be interested in research that demonstrates how learning outcomes are impacted by online learning.

The Province of Newfoundland and Labrador offers a Level 1 ABE curriculum online. The curriculum is housed with the Department of Education through Memorial University. Learners begin by attending face-to-face sessions to learn how to use the equipment and website. Learners need to be registered with a literacy program in order to participate. They have the support of an instructor, via phone, email or online, if needed.

We asked questions concerning digital technology policies and found that many organizations had a policy for social media. With the exception of one coalition, policies for security and file management were not mentioned. A third of the interviewees had technology plans or were in the process of developing them. This is an area that needs further discussion as sharing templates could alleviate some of the work involved in developing policies from scratch.

Funding is always an issue, as is capacity. The lack of IT support, limited staff capacity, lack of training on how to make the most efficient and effective use of technology, and not enough time to implement new ideas are common challenges.

It was suggested that CLLN host a virtual venue where regional and national information could be shared. This would help to tie the field more closely together, both from a coalition perspective and from a program perspective. It could also house a library of resources. There is a need for active management of information, rather than simply storing it in a passive repository. The field needs resource management that is cohesive, linked and easier to use.

Moving Forward

Digital technology is increasingly a component of our everyday lives. A recent study by the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association found that over 75% of Canadians have a mobile phone or wireless device. It is anticipated that this percentage will increase rapidly.⁴ Ipsos Reid reported that 80% of Canadian homes had internet access in 2011.

Based on evidence from the snapshot, the following activities could be considered as opportunities for organizations to enhance their current use of digital technology. These activities are presented as suggestions.

Connectivity

Connectivity is still a considerable issue across the country. Learning opportunities are not equal in all areas of the country.

- ▶ The literacy field may wish to work together to highlight the need for improved connectivity.
- ▶ Organizations may want to share ideas about circumventing the issue by using alternative tools e.g. creating PowerPoint presentations that reflect the information delivered in webinars.

Planning

Comprehensive technology plans help with the integration of technology into the everyday activities of an organization. Incorporating digital technology into all aspects of program delivery helps learners develop the skills they need outside the classroom.

Digital technology is constantly evolving, and it can be helpful to assess strengths, weaknesses and needs.

- ▶ Use free resources such as TechSoup Canada's practical Tech Self-Assessment Tool that enables agencies to develop effective action plans.
- ▶ A more in-depth technology assessment provides a non-biased overview and action plan regarding strengths, weaknesses, and needs related to digital technology. This would require a financial outlay but may be beneficial given the importance of digital technology.
- ▶ Integrate digital technology use into job tasks/activities.
- ▶ Embed current digital technology skills and knowledge requirements into job descriptions.

Policies

Policies and procedures around digital technology are important aspects of good governance. Initiate or review policies and processes relating to digital technology. This can be done as a stand-alone project or integrated into other business planning processes.

- ▶ When developing policies and procedures, consider the following components: types of equipment, social media, online safety, privacy, risk to reputation, etc.

⁴ Source: The Globe and Mail, June 4, 2012. www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/mobile/canada-on-track-to-pass-100-per-cent-wireless-penetration-rate/article4230795

Mobile Technology

- ▶ Job descriptions could be reviewed, and consideration could be given to the effective use of mobile technology, particularly when regular travel and out-of-office time is a job requirement.
- ▶ Administrators may want to consider the financial implications (costs and benefits) of using mobile technology. Build cost of mobile digital technology into budgets.
- ▶ Incorporate the use of mobile technology (such as smart phones and tablets) in teaching and learning situations.
- ▶ Purchase anti-theft devices such as docking stations, tablet locking systems and other deterrents to theft of these mobile devices.

Training

Create professional development for using and applying digital technology. Training around the use and application of digital technology is an important factor that can be considered as part of professional development. It takes time to learn how to use new technology effectively.

- ▶ Use in-house expertise.
- ▶ Hold lunch and learn sessions. For example, training on SmartBoard technology. This may help achieve the best return on investment and make the most of a SmartBoard as a tool.
- ▶ Work with external organizations (local, regional, national) to reduce training costs.

Financial considerations

Incorporating technology requires a financial commitment.

- ▶ When developing budgets, consider costs for initial purchase, maintenance and regular replacement.
- ▶ Use free resources such as Tech Soup.

- ▶ Good quality refurbished desktops and laptops are often available through recycle/reuse programs. These offer a low-cost way to add to a computer lab or to purchase equipment.

Collaboration

Organizations may also wish to collaborate locally, provincially or nationally to make better use of resources.

- ▶ Use webinars to share information.

Resource List

Keep a resource list of up-to-date information, possibly in the following areas:

- ▶ Grants
- ▶ Reuse/recycle programs
- ▶ Organizations offering discounts to non-profit organizations or educational programs
- ▶ Best practices
- ▶ Tips for integrating digital technology into teaching methods

Case Studies

Create case studies that show how programs have integrated digital technology.

- ▶ Make case studies available so that others can learn from them or contact the organizations for more information.

Next Steps

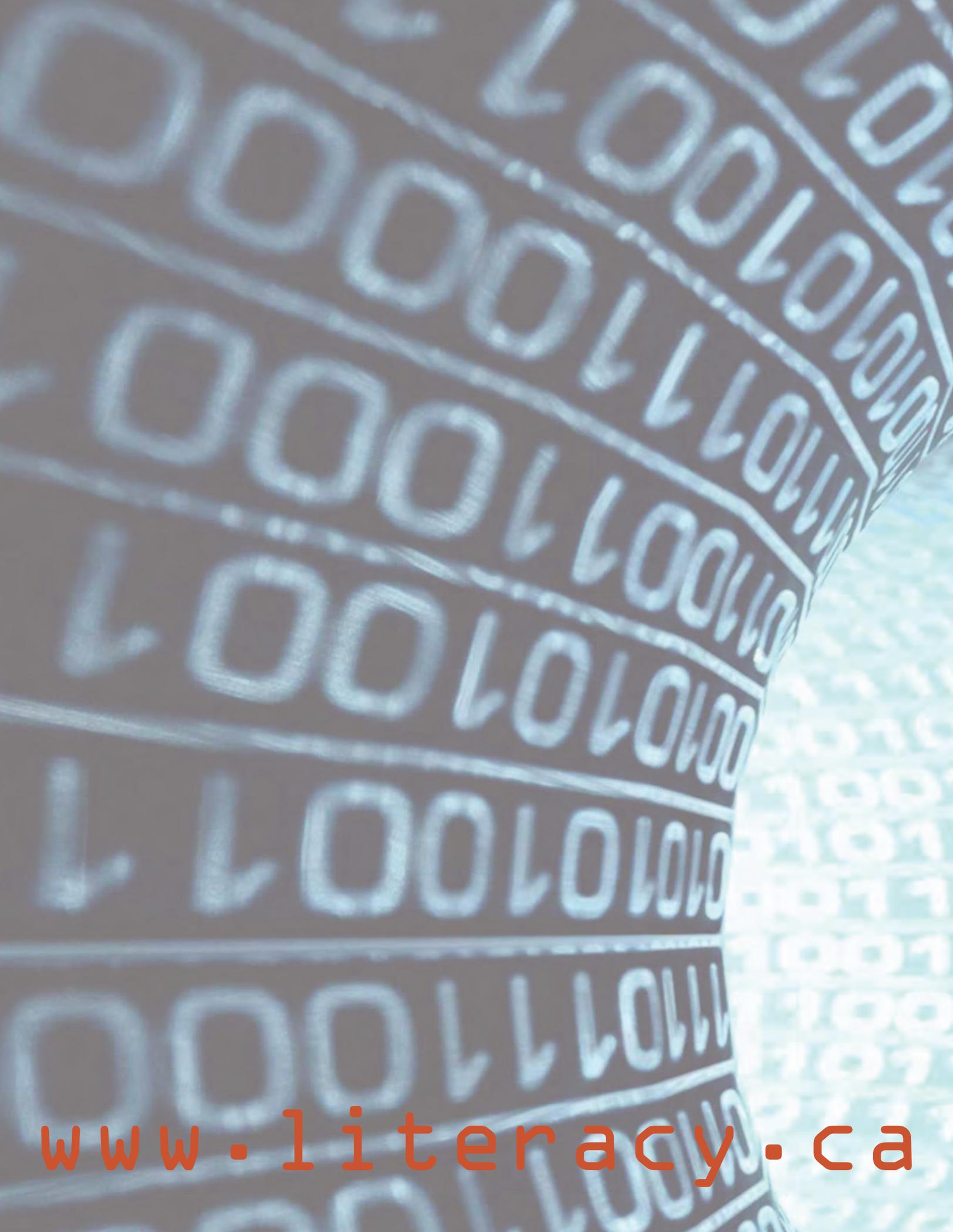
CLLN will hold discussions with provincial and territorial literacy coalitions and other stakeholders in early summer 2013 to discuss work that still needs to be done in the area of digital technology.

Appendix 1: The Questionnaire

Six questions were asked on the questionnaire and during the key informant interview. Basic demographic data was also collected.

The six questions were:

- 1) What type of digital technology do you use in your organization and for what purposes?
- 2) Do you have a formal technology plan? Is technology part of your annual operating budget?
- 3) What challenges do you face that keep you from more fully integrating digital technology in your organization?
- 4) Does your organization have any formal policies and procedures around the use of digital technology for staff and/or learners?
- 5) What would you like to do with digital technology that you don't do now?
- 6) What training needs do you have in the area of digital technology?



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