

#### Measuring program impact: How do we define success?

ABC Life Literacy Canada 2022 Innovation Learning Lab: Session 3  
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#### Session overview

In the literacy field, reporting program impact and program success is vital for program funding, yet is often challenging. Criteria such as increased learner empowerment or increased learner confidence are difficult to measure but are crucial for both program development and program reporting. While quantitative data, such as number of learners reached, is more easily collected, it is often the qualitative data that provides insight into program success.

We asked three questions to our panelists:

1. What does success look like for your programs?
2. How do you measure success, and what are some of the quantitative and qualitative indicators that you use?
3. How do you share your success with the rest of your organization, funders, and community?

#### Panelists

- Denise Dennis from Frontier College in Ontario. Their “Beat the Street” program aims to empower young adults who may be experiencing houselessness or other challenges. This program received an honorable mention from the *Canada Life Literacy Innovation Awards* (LIA) in 2018.
- Lucie Jeffers, the Chief Strategy Officer of Canada Learning Code in Ontario, also an honourable mention winner of the LIA in 2021. This organization focuses on digital literacy and has various programs which aim to reach marginalized groups and improve their confidence with technology.
- Elizabeth Lalond from The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind, a Division of the Canadian Organization of the Blind and Deaf Blind in British Columbia. Their program ‘Blind People in Charge’ is designed to build the skills and confidence of participants in various areas of their lives. This program received the top LIA in 2017.

#### Key findings

The discussion began with panelists defining what success means to their organization. Although programs varied widely in their outcomes and goals, some of the common success markers included; job attainment and retention, improved soft skills, and higher education attainment. In addition, one of the underlying traits of a successful program is that learners emerge from the program with an increased sense of confidence. To ensure a program is successful in increasing learner confidence, programs need to include a variety of perspectives during program development and implementation. This includes community involvement, as well as underrepresented communities.

All panelists agreed that regardless of the program curriculum, successful programs should encourage learners to be confident in advocating for themselves, whether that be in employment, politics, health, or any other aspect of their lives. Panelists also agreed that success meant that the learner was able to fully participate in their community as well as develop a love of lifelong learning.

One of the key findings from this discussion was that success is a slow-going transformative process. This means that organizations should recognize that program impact may not be immediately measurable, and should account for a longer evaluation process. When possible, organizations should evaluate their programs and their learners' experiences at a number of different milestones. One example mentioned by a panelist was the use of an intake assessment at the beginning of the program, an evaluation with the learner midway through, and an exit survey at the end of the program. In addition, the panelist's organization also offers follow-up assessments a year after the learner finishes the program. Not only is this an opportunity for the organization to provide additional support to the learner, guaranteeing increased learner success, but it also provides information as to what supports and resources may be lacking or require more attention for learners currently in the program.

When measuring program impact, the panelists emphasized the importance of having various methods of tracking learner experience and outcomes. Surveys tend to be a good way to track quantitative data, such as number of workshops run, number of learners reached, and demographics of the learners, which is often needed for funder reports. This type of data is a great way to identify who is attending the program and what community of learners are not being reached.

Equally important is the collection of qualitative data through anecdotes, focus groups, and informal conversations. This type of data allows practitioners to better understand why learners attend their programs, how it has helped them, and what improvements can be made. Once again, evaluations should be periodically conducted, so that practitioners may track learner progress. Once all quantitative and qualitative data has been collected, the panelists discussed the value of using external contractors for evaluation reporting, allowing for an unbiased assessment of the program. Part of the success of an overall organization is how the organization responds to this feedback, improves, and continues to be responsive to both staff and learners.

Lastly, panelists discussed different ways they were able to celebrate the successes of their programs and their learners. Newsletters and social media posts were amongst the most popular methods. One panelist talked about their organization hosting awards and recognition ceremonies for outstanding learners and volunteers. They found this to be an effective way for learners to share their experiences and stories. In addition, this became another opportunity for learners to increase their confidence, further contributing to the success of the program.

Due to the lively discussion from the panelists, there was little time for a Q&A session. If time had permitted, it would have been great if the panelists could talk more about how to encourage learners to complete evaluations, as well as how to make the evaluation process more effective.

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This year we're hosting four Innovation Learning Labs, thanks to the support of Canada Life through the *Canada Life Literacy Innovation Award*. In each webinar we will discuss one topic that is important and relevant to the literacy field in 2022. [Watch recorded Labs and read summaries.](#)