

Taking flight with your pilot project: best practices for supporting innovation and experimentation

ABC Life Literacy Canada 2022 Innovation Learning Lab: Session 4
October 6, 2022

Session overview

This webinar celebrated the winning programs of the 2022 *Canada Life Literacy Innovation Awards* (LIA).

Top prize LIA winner: the Further Education Society of Alberta and their program “Cooks with Stones”. This program showcases how traditional Indigenous teachings and skills are applicable to non-Indigenous workplaces. The program is a collaborative effort to remove barriers to employment for Stoney youth and create opportunities for employment in the Hospitality and Tourism sector in the Stoney region.

LIA honourable mention winner: Pinnguaq and their program “Inclusive Futures: Skilled Workforce Development in Nunavut”. Pinnguaq developed this program in response to the increasing need for digital literacy and employability skill development amongst rural Indigenous communities in Nunavut.

LIA honourable mention winner: Stella’s Circle and their program “Stella’s Circle Adult Basic Education Level 1”. This program supports a wide variety of marginalized learners, such as learners with physical and mental health challenges, learners facing addiction and/or poverty, and learners that have experience with the justice system. At the start of the program, each learner is individually assessed to determine their educational goals as well as to understand what other support services they will need to be successful.

To help encourage innovation, we invited this year’s LIA recipients to share their insights and best practices for creating innovative programs. Being innovative often means taking risks and working with new communities or curriculum, which may be discouraging for organizations and practitioners.

We asked three questions to our panelists:

1. How do you start creating an innovative program and do you remember a specific experience/conversation in the planning stages where you wished that your organization had done something differently?
2. How do you encourage learners and practitioners to try out a particularly new and innovative program and what are some of the potential hesitations that you’ve encountered?

3. What has helped your program get to where it is today and what advice would you have for others who want to set off in a similar direction?

Panelists

- Teal Dratowany, Project Manager, and Shawna Linklater, Indigenous Learning Specialists, Further Education Society of Alberta
- Robynn Pavia, Senior Manager, Pinnguaq
- Sarah Mills, Program Manager, and Jessica Lee-Middleman, Education Professional and Instructor, with Stella's Circle

Key findings

Early on in the discussion, all speakers agreed on the importance of creating programming that was learner-centered. This involved not only understanding what gaps needed to be addressed but also what types of resources and supports were of interest to learners and identifying how learners wanted to be presented this information. Further Education Society of Alberta worked with Indigenous communities and their elders to see what kind of curriculum would work best for their learners. For Pinnguaq, digital literacy was broadly identified as an important skill for the community. Upon further discussion with the community members, they were able to also identify that there was community interest in learning more about online banking, online safety, and overall online money management (e.g. Canada Revenue Agency website). In addition to working with learners, Stella's Circle also emphasized the importance of collaborating with experts in the field when creating innovative programs.

Even when creating an innovative program that is learner-centered, it is very likely that things may go wrong. In these situations, the speakers encouraged practitioners to be open to mistakes, being transparent with all stakeholders, and willing to take feedback and apply it to improve the program. By being flexible with programming and by continuing to have open conversations with the learner community, the chances of mistakes happening may be mitigated and or reduced.

Stella's Circle brought up the important point that practitioners need to recognize that some learners may have a negative experience with the traditional education system. Therefore, it is important for programs to create a safe, fun, and comfortable learning environment. Pinnguaq, tries to incorporate play into as much of their programming as possible. For example, their digital literacy program begins with learners playing the Game of Life. Further Education Society of Alberta includes daily smudges and positive affirmations as part of their program. Stella's Circle, tries to have their learners understand that their practitioners are there to support their goals and aspirations by providing support beyond their literacy programs as well as creating personalized learning paths, and adjusting them as needed by the learner.

Innovation Learning Lab Summary

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Attendees were particularly interested in understanding how organizations assess the needs of their communities during the program development phase. One of the common methods identified by all organizations was the use of formal evaluations. These evaluations help organizations assess what programs are still needed in the community as well as how current programs can be improved upon. The speakers also once again emphasized the importance of having open communication. While learners are a wonderful resource to draw upon when determining program focus, practitioners should also have a much broader reach and include other stakeholders such as employers.

Both the Further Education Society of Alberta and Stella's Circle also highly recommended the use of the platform "Photovoice" as a way for learners to better engage with the program. Learners are given a particular prompt which they then have to take a photo and write up a small excerpt on how it fits the prompt. The speakers really enjoyed the program as it helped learners feel more confidence with their writing skills. Attendees were really interested in the platform with some expressing interest in reaching out to the speakers to learn more at a later time.

Overall, this webinar was a great success and a wonderful way to wrap up the Innovation Learning Lab series for 2022. Attendees of the webinar took away some great tips and best practices and were also able to congratulate this year's LIA winners.

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.](#)