

# **PROJECT REPORT**

**From**

**The Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing  
Education School Board Administrators (CESBA)**

**Field Development Project: 2003-2004  
“Online Professional Development Using a Mentoring Approach”**

**Completed October 2004**

# *Online Professional Development Using a Mentoring Approach Final Report*

## *Project Objectives*

There were three main objectives for CESBA's 2003-2004 Field Development Project, Online Professional Development Using a Mentoring Approach:

1. to design and build a website to house six modules of Professional Development Training,
2. to attach an online mentoring component to the training, determine its viability and evaluate its potential for the future,
3. to summarize the research findings and recommendations in a report to the field.

These objectives were natural extensions that grew out of CESBA's previous project work on practitioner training initiatives for the school board sector. In the previous year, a CD-ROM library of six practitioner training modules had been developed and the feedback received from across the province was very positive. Computerized training offered a number of benefits:

- it allowed practitioners to take training at times that worked best for their schedules,
- it overcame the geographic barriers to training encountered by so many practitioners who work in isolated programs and regions
- it provided a way for practitioners to select training that meets their particular needs and interests;
- it was a handy resource for LBS Managers who have very little time available for planning training sessions for instructors
- it supported consistency in training in that all practitioners across the province had access to the same information and received the same instruction.

Putting the training online would increase the accessibility of the training even further by making it available to everyone at any time, thus avoiding delays while waiting for CDs that were currently in use. Online training would also make it easy to modify materials as need be and/or add new resources and training as it become available.

The addition of a one-to-one mentoring service for the profession promised to bring individualized training to a whole new level and would help to counter the sense of isolation that some people referred to when describing their experiences with online training.

A review of the current and most common methods of professional development training revealed a variety of approaches with varying levels of success.

- Some LBS practitioners have the benefit of regular bi-weekly or monthly in-service training sessions, but many programs do not offer this.
- Many practitioners attend full-day PD training events which range, program to program, from half a day to three days each year.
- Some take advantage of regional conferences and training days planned by the Networks but attendance is often sporadic.
- Larger two- and three-day conferences draw other practitioners but the expense seems to be a deterrent for many.
- Online training opportunities via the virtual classroom are growing but class size is limited and the time slot has to compete with other commitments.
- Finally, some register for Adult Educator Certificate programs through local colleges or through distance education. While the certification is a definite attraction and the training is comprehensive, the cost is high and the time commitment extends beyond two years.

CESBA's contribution to practitioner training through courses online accompanied by the professional mentorship provides an additional opportunity for training that can fill the gap and meet some need that other approaches cannot.

The six modules of LBS Practitioner Training are:

- Backgrounder
- Module 1: Literacy and Basic Skills 101
- Module 2: Approaches to Adult Learners and Adult Learning
- Module 3: Working with Adults with Learning Disabilities
- Module 4: Planning the LBS Program
- Module 5: Most Effective Training
- Module 6: Professional Issues for LBS Practitioners

## ***The Project in Review***

### **Objective #1: Practitioner Training Online**

#### **A burgeoning enterprise:**

As the project unfolded, it seemed to blossom, which is a gentle way of saying it grew larger and larger as we went along.

#### *Additional writing*

As we began the work of reviewing, updating, editing, and re-formatting the six modules of training for the World Wide Web, we recognized the need to reorganize large chunks of training and write a considerable amount of supporting text.

- Backgrounder, the introductory “module within the modules” was disassembled and the text rewritten into documents that could be kept separate from the training. These documents would provide background information for readers who may be interested in finding out more about literacy training in Ontario. The following five documents were created for this purpose:
  - Introductions
  - Core Quality Standards for adult Literacy Programs in Ontario
  - The Literacy and Basic Skills Program of Ontario
  - Core Skills for Adult Literacy Educators in School Boards
  - Origins and History of this Practitioner training Strategy
  - The Benefits of Professional Development Training
  - Acknowledgements
- Additional text was written to support the navigation and easy accessibility for the modules of training. Those documents included:
  - More about Training
  - Tables of Content
  - Training Tips
- The other two special features of the website, the Self-Assessment Tool and the Mentorship Services required orientation for the reader and careful explanation and support. To that end, we wrote text for:
  - More about self-assessment
  - More about mentorship
  - Meet the Mentors
  - Request a Mentor
- The forms we created to support registration and use of the website included:

- The Registration form
  - The Request a Mentor form
  - The “Contact Us” form
  - The “Forgot Your Password?” form
  - The login form
- The material we wrote for automated messages for various purposes included text for:
    - Thank you for registering
    - Choosing a training module to start
    - Instructions if you have forgotten your password

*An interactive tool*

Early on, we envisioned an interactive self-assessment tool that would allow practitioners to assess and evaluate their own professional skills and abilities and produce an individualized action plan for training. It could be very beneficial. It could capture the interest and attention of the casual viewer; it might motivate some practitioners to start in on training; it would clearly help practitioners prioritize their training according to their needs. More ground work was necessary, so the content of the tool itself was further field-tested for reliability, validity and overall usefulness. Feedback was very encouraging.

*I like doing self-assessment activities anyway so it was fun to do one that was specific to my work in LBS.*

*I was kind of excited about tabulating my scores and reading the results. For me it was right on the mark.*

*It was helpful because I now know which module will benefit me the most and which one I don't really need.*

*I was just going to start at Module 1 and work my way through. Actually, what I really need most is Module 3 on Learning Disabilities.*

The construction of the interactive tool was more complicated than first anticipated; however, despite the fact that it was more time-consuming than we could predict, we were very excited about the result. Continued testing of the online version yielded a number of small but helpful suggestions and one major recommendation which we incorporated into the final version, i.e. breaking the assessments into four very distinct sections with explanatory text to introduce each section.

*How the online self-assessment activity works:*

- The tool contains a list of statements that are related to four areas of professional work:
  - Professional knowledge
  - Professional practice
  - Professional accountability
  - Professional conduct
- For each item, viewers assign themselves a value of 1 to 4 that reflects what they think of their level of skill or their knowledge in that particular area.
- The tool calculates the viewers' score automatically and displays the results at the end of the assessment.

- The readers can read what their score suggests about their level of professional knowledge or skill in each area.
- Based on the reader's self-evaluation, the tool also provides a recommended plan of action for professional development training by ordering the modules of training from the most helpful to the least needed according to the assessment results.

#### *Website Design:*

The design and lay out for the website was an interesting process with constructive input from the Project Advisory Committee, outside consultants, individual practitioners and LBS Managers. We quickly reached agreement on the criteria: easy to read, easy to use, attractive design, quick access to important information, clear language, a welcoming look and feel, a registration process, a secure environment for the mentoring component, and capacity for expansion in the future. What all those things would actually look like in the final product took a little more time to settle. In the end, however, there was genuine, overall satisfaction and approval.

All of these efforts which we have described up to this point consumed a significant amount of project time and energy, yet they were still only addressing the first project objective: getting the modules of training online. We agreed, however that they were, nonetheless, crucial to the overall success of the project.

### **Objective #2: Mentoring Services Online**

Running concurrently was research, planning and thinking about the second major thrust of the project: to develop a system for mentoring services online. Preliminary investigation revealed that we were definitely sailing uncharted waters. Again, we set criteria to ensure the best possible end product. We wanted:

- A secure interface to protect the privacy of all participants
- An intuitive layout to accommodate novice computer users
- A friendly, non-threatening presence on the website
- A way to capture the written dialogue between mentor and participant and store it in a safe place
- Ability to transfer participants back and forth from one mentor to another
- A management system for additions and deletions
- Capacity to handle a large number of participants at one time
- A database with capacity for gathering and displaying a variety of statistics
  - # of people taking training
  - # of people working on each module
  - # of people working with mentors
  - # of people working with each mentor
  - # of participants from each sector

The web developer contracted a software developer to construct a tool that would meet these specifications. E-Mentor took several months to build and underwent many tests and modifications. Out of necessity, we field-tested various elements at various stages of development making changes and refinements as we went along. In its final state, eMentor was tested with a number of volunteer practitioners with a wide range of background knowledge and skill on computers. Some were novice Internet users; some were very competent. The general consensus was that eMentor, as a tool, was intuitive, interesting and fun to use. We had yet to determine its effectiveness as a means of delivering support for online training.

### ***Ementor, the tool***

*Online Professional Development Using a Mentoring Approach*  
*A Project of CESBA, 2003-2004*  
*J. Barber, Project Consultant*

### *How does it work?*

When practitioners submit a request for a mentor, their name automatically appears on a request list that only mentors can access. At the same time, the mentors are notified through an automated message by e-mail that a new person has been added to the list and is waiting for a response. This prompts the mentors to check the list, and, if the file is still unclaimed, add the new person to their own mentoring group. Hopefully within the day, the mentor will send off a first message and the practitioner will get an e-mail that:

1. says, "You've got mail",
2. provides a direct link to the login.

Practitioners can then click on the link, login with their personal Username and Password, and read their messages. If they wish, they can send back a reply. Email is used as the means for providing prompts about waiting messages. Ementor is password protected to ensure the safety and privacy of messages.

### *Roles and responsibilities – what to expect in mentoring*

Once practitioners and mentors are connected, they can send messages back and forth whenever they wish. Together, they will decide how they want the mentorship to work. For example, if practitioners want to do a large chunk of training all in one sitting, they and their mentors may agree together on a particular date and time-frame for exchanging messages. If, on the other hand, practitioners plan to spread the training out over several days or weeks, they may agree together that they will check their e-mail regularly to see if messages are waiting but that there's no rush for responding on either side.

Early on, they might discuss things like: what they are hoping to get out of the relationship, and how much support, or what kind of support they are looking for. In these ways practitioners can actively participate in shaping the mentoring relationship to fit their own needs and preferences.

Like all good coaches, LBS mentors will look for ways to increase capacity as well as to celebrate achievement. Practitioners can look forward to some challenging questions that will help them stretch and develop in new ways.

### *Mentorship online*

Mentors for LBS practitioners are professionals in adult literacy who have experience and success in working with learners and/or have demonstrated expertise in a particular area of LBS program delivery, e.g. special skill with learning disabilities or in teaching numeracy. A mentoring relationship can provide practitioners with support and help them in their professional work as they are developing new skills. Mentors are not like teachers; they do not provide instruction or evaluation. They do, however, listen carefully and bring their considerable knowledge and wisdom to the table as different conversations take place with individual practitioners about professional concerns or issues of interest. Think, "coach"; like a coach, they come alongside to:

- listen,
- offer encouragement,
- help you examine your own thinking and practice,
- suggest resources and strategies,
- provide feedback as you assess and evaluate the results.

### *Changes as the project progressed*

## 1. Increased capacity:

As the website was introduced and field-tested across the province, it generated a lot of interest from people involved in other field development projects. CESBA recognized potential for expansion in the future and took steps to build in capacity so that the website would be able to incorporate other materials and training as it became available.

MTCU also recognized the potential for broader use and strongly recommended that CESBA plan ahead when developing the registration system in order to allow access for LBS instructors from any sector and stream in the future. As a result, the database CESBA developed has the capacity to track the numbers of participants who are taking training from any particular LBS agency or sector.

## 2. Adjustment due to government changes.

One of the purposes for housing the training on a website was to partner with the Ontario College of Teachers and provide courses for Professional Learning Plan credit to LBS instructors who are OCT members. According to the original plan, the website would allow CESBA to gather information, deliver, monitor, assess, and track professional development training. With the new provincial government, however, PLP credits are no longer mandatory so the need for close monitoring and assessment of training by CESBA. Because of the added costs involved for maintaining that particular service, this was a welcome change to the outcomes for the project. The website continues to have the capacity to gather information about who uses this site.

### ***Summary of Project Activity***

In order to achieve the project objectives, CESBA:

- contracted with two project consultants: Jane Barber as project lead and Gary Dumbleton as web developer.
- established a project advisory committee made up of members of the CESBA Literacy Committee. This decision ensured full regional representation for guiding the project.
- engaged Donna Zener as the outside project evaluator.

Activities that were deemed necessary but fell beyond the original mandate of the project are identified in the following lists by an asterisk\*.

#### **Objective # 1**

- Reviewed, updated, edited and re-formatted the six modules of practitioner training.
- Designed and created a website and procured the domain name of, LBSpractitionertraining.com.
- Transferred materials created in Microsoft Word into HTML and PDF.
- Uploaded the training modules to the World Wide Web.
- \*Created the necessary tools for a registration and login system for practitioners choosing to take training with or without a mentor.
- Created supporting documents and additional text.
- \*Created an online, interactive self-assessment tool that automatically calculates scores and produces a training plan based on self-assessment results.
- Vetted each new document and field-tested each feature along the way.

#### **Objective #2**

- Conducted research into current mentoring approaches with distance education.
- Developed pathways and guidelines for technology-based mentorship.
- Designed a mentorship system.
- Constructed a tool to ensure a secure environment for mentorship online.
- Linked the mentorship component to the six modules of training.
- Field-tested this approach for working with LBS practitioners.

### **Objective #3**

- Constructed a searchable database to link with information gathered through the registration process.
- \*Created a control panel that displays statistics in real time along with the details and status of all mentoring activity; this to be managed by the Administrator.
- Linked the database to the Mentor Administrator's control panel.
- \*Created a quick search tool.

### ***Project Evaluation***

A Project Advisory Committee was established in September of 2003, to guide the process. This group included:

Wendy Oliver, CESBA Projects Coordinator  
 Liz D'Andrea, Toronto District School Board  
 Linda DePiero, Lakehead District School Board  
 Bob Baldin Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board  
 Mary Adamson, Waterloo Region District School Board  
 Trudy Lothian, Ottawa-Carleton Catholic District School Board  
 Linda Anne Lott, Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board  
 Kay Munro, Thames Valley District School Board  
 Susan Lefebvre, Toronto Catholic District School Board  
 Irene Blayney, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board  
 Dalia Taylor, Peel District School Board  
 Murray MacDonald, Algoma District School Board

This cross-section of participants ensured that the reference group included wide regional representation from all aspects of programming found in the school boards of Ontario. Face-to-face meetings were held to discuss the project on Oct. 17, 2003, and Feb. 23, 2004 and numerous small group telephone conferences and correspondence via email were held regularly throughout.

In addition, Donna Zener, former LBS Program Manager, was contracted to act as an outside evaluator for the project. It is her responsibility to conduct a final review of all aspects of the project work and to submit a final report to MTCU. Ms Zener attended an initial meeting with the Project Advisory Committee and maintained regular contact with the project developer throughout via telephone reports and email.

To take advantage of other consultation opportunities, the project developer presented project updates via PowerPoint presentation to all school board LBS Managers and Administrators at two provincial meetings, on Dec. 3, 2003 in Toronto, and on May, 2004 in Niagara Falls. She facilitated the feedback sessions at both events.

The project developer introduced the website and field-tested the self-assessment tool with over one hundred LBS practitioners in seven school boards across the province during professional development days. Practitioners responded by completing evaluation forms at the conclusion of the trials.

In addition, eight individual practitioners volunteered to field test specific areas of the website and to provide further feedback. Field-testing guide questions and an evaluation form was provided for that purpose.

The website developer contracted additional outside evaluators to test the navigational and technical aspects of the web site and to provide feedback on any faulty actions.

### ***Final Reflection and Recommendations***

<http://www.LBSpractitionertraining.com> was designed and launched as the school board LBS practitioner training website. The Homepage contains links that provide the reader with:

- an orientation to adult literacy training in Ontario and the Literacy and Basic Skills Program,
- access to six modules of training in either html or pdf format,
- links to a professional self-assessment tool
- links to eMentor, the online mentoring system.

The training itself has been through a double screening process – first as the CD Rom library of training produced by last year’s project, and now again, in a better version, as courses in adult education online. The training is both compact and comprehensive and spans all areas of the LBS practitioner’s work. The tone is informal and the writing and layout encourage fast reading.

The mentorship component provides another level of assessment and accountability. It offers a deep level of support to instructors who want to improve their professional skills by providing a way for them to interact with experienced, successful and trained LBS professionals. Mentors stimulate new thinking by raising questions during the course of their online dialogues with practitioners and make suggestions regarding strategies and resources as is appropriate. In this way, developing skills are strengthened, practitioners feel less isolated throughout training, and relationships are forged that support increased consistency across the province in knowledge and practice of LBS program delivery.

#### *Recommendations:*

Based on our research, experience throughout this project, and feedback from a wide range of participants, the project developer would make the following recommendations:

- that further application for project funding be made in order to:
  - find a way to measure the quality of mentoring in practitioner training online
  - identify essential skills for mentoring online
  - explore the possibilities of an online mentoring system to serve all sectors and streams;
- that a feasibility study be conducted to determine possible collaboration among sectors for establishing a one-stop shopping location for practitioner training online with mentoring services;
- that partnerships be forged with willing sectors and streams for the purpose of combining practitioner training resources in an online practitioner training site to serve specific needs for all.

Respectfully submitted,

Jane Barber, Project Developer