



## The Silver Lining Café



**September 2020**

# How It All Started



## The Silver Lining Café

In the spring of 2020, it became increasingly clear that the Covid pandemic would present



substantial and ongoing challenges to LBS/ESU instructors. In response to these challenges, Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) created the Silver Lining Café, a community of practice aimed at enabling instructors to adapt to the realities of education during a pandemic. Our overarching intent was to enable professional development and inspire confidence in practitioners during this time of unprecedented disruption. The name Silver Lining was chosen to acknowledge the incredible motivation

and ingenuity demonstrated by LBS/ESU instructors as they navigated the complexities presented by the pandemic.

Literacy practitioners from across Toronto and York Region were invited to meet weekly using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Over the course of 5 months, the number of participants grew from 12 to 44 members. Our goal was to create a space where participant-driven conversations would happen in a relaxed format, a space where they could share achievements, experiences, challenges, and technical knowledge with peers. Silver Lining Café participants set the weekly agendas and were provided the space and support to collaboratively find solutions to common challenges. We tried to keep it relevant, so discussions were guided by two questions: “What are you doing now?” and “What do you want to know?”

The Silver Lining Café was designed by MTML for Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) practitioners in Toronto and York Region. While MTML created the concept of the Café, it would not have been possible to deliver this initiative without our partnership with AlphaPlus. Their expertise and support played a key role in ensuring success.

With significant contributions from MTML, AlphaPlus and the participants who attended the Café, we developed a large repository of resources.

## The Challenges to LBS practitioners

When Ontario declared a state of emergency in March 2020 due to the pandemic, MTML reached out to its network through a survey<sup>1</sup> and through one-to-one discussions with LBS managers to understand the challenges of remote service delivery for LBS providers. MTML learned that the closure of in-person services was difficult for learners and practitioners alike. It also learned that there are many examples of practitioner innovation and creative solutions that make remote learning meaningful for learners.

Key challenges that LBS practitioners face in pivoting to the remote learning environment include the following:

- The swift transition to remote learning was taking place in silos due to a lack of consistent networking across the field. Practitioners were doing their best to pivot to a remote learning model; however, some had limited professional development support and limited knowledge of the best practices emerging across the field.
- Varying levels of comfort with technology among instructors and learners:
  - 73% of providers had not offered online learning in the past,
  - 98% of providers were offering or planning to offer online instruction during the pandemic.
- Complex barriers to learning are amplified in remote settings. These barriers include a lack of access to digital devices and a lack of adequate space or time to learn at home. MTML's online learning survey included a free response section where providers highlighted the difficulty of adapting to new technology while contending with daily barriers to learning.
- Difficulty connecting with low income learners: a report by AlphaPlus indicates that 39% of Ontarians with low income do not have internet at home. Low income learners also tend to have less robust mobile phone data plans, which further complicates access to online learning.
- The devices that people have and the fact that they're trying to read on a phone, or they're sharing a computer with five other people who are all trying to get their schoolwork done added another layer of complexity.
- The variety of online learning applications and platforms is overwhelming to practitioners who have limited time and training to learn and apply in a beneficial way. MTML's online learning survey revealed a demand among practitioners to learn more about specific technology platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Padlet, Canvas, FlipGrid, and Moodle.
- There are many examples of instructor excellence and innovation connecting with learners which directly addresses the digital challenges learners are experiencing; however, there is no platform to share these successes with the LBS field.
- Many LBS practitioners expressed feeling isolated.

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<sup>1</sup> MTML, April 2020, Online Learning Survey Report

# The Silver Lining Café Design

To build a community of practice among practitioners and to ultimately support learner engagement, MTML began offering weekly virtual meetups called Silver Linings Café on Zoom. As stated previously, the phrase “Silver Lining” was chosen to acknowledge the incredible motivation and the ingenuity of practitioners while they navigate the complexities presented by the coronavirus pandemic. The word Café was used to promote the idea that the sessions would be a space in which conversations would happen in a relaxed format.

Silver Lining Café is a first-of-its-kind Community of Practice, led by practitioners, for practitioners. The goal was to offer a practitioner-driven peer support group, where practitioners could share achievements, experiences and technical knowledge with their peers in a supportive and structured setting. As stated earlier, discussions were guided by two questions: **“What are you doing now?”** and **“What do you want to know?”**. With these two prompts, practitioners had the freedom to share their successes, challenges and training needs with their peers.

MTML hosted the Silver Lining Café once a week and partnered with AlphaPlus, which specializes in educational technology coaching. AlphaPlus staff was able to field technical questions and develop in-demand workshops on specific technologies participants wanted to learn more about. In total, MTML hosted over forty literacy practitioners in 12 virtual café meetups, from April 30th to June 25th, 2020.

## The Silver Lining Café Model

### 1. Silver Lining Café Group Session

- Practitioners share their successes, challenges; Facilitators provide support
- Instructors contribute ideas, make suggestions, help each other
- New content presented

### 2. Capture & Communicate

- Facilitator documents key session content
- Summary & tips, techniques, resource links sent to registered SLC participants
- Next session agenda generated based on participant feedback



### 4. Reflection

- Instructors reflect on their own application of the remote technology lessons they have learned & prepare their feedback for the next SLC session

### 3. Application by Instructors

- Instructors apply the SLC techniques & lessons they have learned in their remote, on-line classes

## The Silver Lining Café Design, Cont.

Based on the expressed needs of practitioners, MTML and AlphaPlus researched technologies that practitioners wanted to learn and provided interactive demonstrations that allowed practitioners to become familiar with a new feature or skill which they could apply in their next online class. Furthermore, practitioners received weekly Café summaries that included step-by-step instructions and visuals from the interactive workshops that served as “how-to” reference guides. In addition to step-by-step instructions for specific technologies, the weekly summaries included lesson plan ideas, intake and assessment protocols, and how to create a learning community in a remote learning context. Practitioners also shared timely and important *Community Support* resources with each other, such as links to food donation programs for vulnerable learners, computer donation programs and the Toronto Public Library’s “hotspot” loan program. Our process encouraged connection, collaboration and shared accountability for learning.

MTML encouraged Café participants to trial the tips and technological skills they learned during Café sessions, and to report back to the group about their experiences. Where there was a need, MTML also offered additional small group tutorials to support further practice with the technical details of online tools such as Zoom.

# Silver Lining Café - Outcomes and Future Directions

MTML received excellent feedback about Silver Linings Café from LBS providers in Toronto and York Region. In fact, the café was such a hit among practitioners that MTML has extended its offering to include more Café sessions during the summer, typically a time when it is difficult to muster participation in learning events.

## CAFÉ OUTCOMES

Over the duration of the sessions, participants reported the following benefits after attending virtual café meetups:

- Shortened learning curve associated with digital technology for remote learning
- Increased confidence in using web-based applications to connect with learners, thanks to the large body of resources and shared experiences documented in weekly summaries.
- Sense of community and support gained from meeting with a core group of peers on a weekly basis.
- Appreciation for the opportunity to connect with peers
- Beneficial impact on learner engagement: As practitioners gained knowledge and confidence with new technology and lesson ideas, their learners benefited from more interactive lessons.
- Feeling empowered to help learners tackle barriers to learning, made worse by pandemic, thanks to information shared by peers about various community supports.
- Café sessions offset the isolation that instructors felt as they navigated the transition to remote learning while physical distancing.

## FUTURE DIRECTION - MORE SUPPORT IS NEEDED

Through an online survey and one-to-one discussions with Café participants, MTML discovered the following about practitioner needs:

- **Closing the Digital Divide:** Practitioners need peer support, information about best-practices and resources to help learners adapt to barriers regarding access to technology and associated digital skills. For instance, 50% of practitioners surveyed reported that at least a quarter of their learners must share a device with their children to access online learning. Over half of practitioners also revealed that, 25% or more of their learners are using only a mobile phone to participate in online classes<sup>2</sup>.
- In contrast to LBS managers, who have formal platforms to share ideas and work on common challenges, practitioners lack a structure for networking across all streams.
- There is an expressed need for a sense of community among LBS practitioners. The pandemic has brought this into sharper focus.

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<sup>2</sup> MTML, June 2020, Learner Technology Survey



- Learning about concepts and ideas requires time for reflection, discussion, and experimentation.
- Learning opportunities would be more effective if they include time for synchronous networking and ad hoc conversations where practitioners can make connections and learn from each other. (This need was also reported in an Alpha Plus led project report in 2017<sup>3</sup>)

## Fostering Connection with Remote Learners

Literacy practitioners in the Toronto and York Region use a variety of ways to connect with remote learners. There are multiple ways that learners and practitioners connect remotely, and these fall into two categories: synchronous and asynchronous learning.

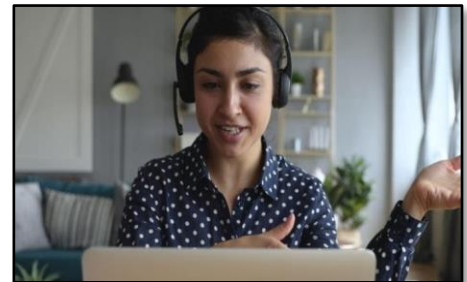


**Asynchronous Learning** happens when instruction and learning take place at separate times (and often places).

E.g. a practitioner first creates a video lesson and, later, learners watch and learn from the video at home in their own time.

**Synchronous Learning** happens when instruction and learning take place at the same time.

E.g. a practitioner offers a live lesson over video conferencing in which a learner attends and participates, in real time.



The shift to remote learning whether synchronous or asynchronous, presents both challenges and opportunities.

<sup>3</sup> AlphaPlus LinkedIn Learning Report – Field Research, 2017

## How Practitioners Connected with Learners in the Spring of 2020

Silver Lining Café participants had lots to say about the challenges and shared tips for building a connection with learners in online settings.

**Participants identified consistent and ongoing contact with learners in ways that met their individual needs as an important best practice.** Practitioners used a variety of creative methods to reach out and provide learning opportunities for their learners, from telephone lessons, texts, WhatsApp, emails, and snail mail to using new video conferencing apps like Zoom, Jitsi, and Webex.

- Reaching out via phone & snail mail with beginning learners/those lacking digital skills or technology to access video conferencing platforms like Zoom.
- Sending lessons/activities via snail mail and email and then follow-up phone conversations to provide one-on-one support.
- Offering one-on-one writing groups over the phone.
- Conducting one-to-one online video conferencing sessions with learners before offering group sessions to ensure learners were comfortable connecting remotely.
- Connecting with learners through WhatsApp.
- Offering to join online with a group or have a one-to-one class. Some did both!
- Dropping off and picking up prepared learning material and digital devices (tablets and laptops) using social distancing protocols.
- Weekly and sometimes daily check-ins to ensure learners understand how to connect online, and to remind them of the class schedule
- Weekly mental health check-ins
- Flexible timetable to accommodate learners who have children at home



## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020

In addition to the feedback we received during the Silver Lining weekly sessions, MTML had the opportunity to interview eleven café participants. All participants were working from home. We asked them to describe:

- their physical workspace at home
- how they transitioned to a remote learning environment
- the major challenges making the transition to remote learning
- what they learned that will continue to inform their practice when back to a bricks and mortar class
- the type of professional development or support that would be helpful to them
- the impact of the Silver Lining Café

We believe the responses of the eleven participants are a fair representation of LBS practitioners experiences in Toronto and York region. The challenges described by the participants echo many of the key points outlined on page two.

### Gaby

*I use my dining room table as my office! I'm using my work laptop... I installed WhatsApp on my phone because we have a WhatsApp group. Sticking to the same work hours as before has been a challenge because learners themselves can't stick to the classroom hour because their kids are around. So, it's a challenge to stick to the 9:00 to 2:30 hours. I put lots of information on WhatsApp and I communicate with them through that. I have 3 learners who have Apple phones and don't have WhatsApp, so I text them. I have 14 people in the class, and we Zoom twice a week. I make it a reoccurring meeting. I copy and paste the link into a text message. Some people don't check their WhatsApp; they prefer text. I can send them all kinds of information because you can put WhatsApp on your computer. I send them material three different ways: on WhatsApp, over text, and email. No one can say they didn't get the material! I am comfortable with technology, and I was comfortable before. I already had those skills.*

*LBS is an individualized program. At any given point, you can have individuals with different expectations and different needs. A lot of learners weren't so skilled [in digital technology] therefore, I couldn't use Zoom and say, for example, "you go into that breakout room and you go to that breakout room" – it would be too difficult. I had to use my imagination and find activities we could do together, to build community. I did the same activity with different expectations. For example, when I asked a question, and I knew that this person is a higher level, therefore has more vocabulary, I would expect them to give different answers according to their level. It wasn't a problem because we could build a sense of community when together online. ...Before the pandemic in my class in Scarborough, I have everybody sit in the class and they worked on different activities, even though they were in one space. But online, in one space, it was a bit of a challenge. Therefore, individual work had to be asynchronous. Building community was synchronous. Learners wanted to see each other, and the Zoom platform allowed us this opportunity.*

## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020 Cont.

### Gaby Cont.

*The most challenging part was getting the learners on board and logged on. I had 14 people. I sent them a link and told them we are going to use ESL Library and Google Classroom. Only two logged on. For the rest it took forever. It was just their ability (digital skills), but it took a long time. Basically, I had to talk to somebody's daughter, son, or somebody's wife to help get the learner logged on. They couldn't do it on their own. Now 13 are online and join the class almost every week.*

*The easiest part was connecting with the learners. I consider the Covid as a shared challenge. At the end of the day I actually benefitted because I gained knowledge from my peers and different learning networks.” – Silver Lining Café Participant, Gaby Jolie, LBS Assessor and Resource, Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB)*

### Ruth

*I am regularly in contact with approximately 15 learners of the 18. I email daily lessons to them. I provide learners with details about the lesson in the body of the email, so they know what's expected before they open the attachments. It's a good idea to use themes that learners can relate to now in their work. For instance, we used the theme of scientists and discussed the work being done by scientists during the pandemic.*

*For learners who prefer to work on paper, I mail out homework packages. I also try to speak with learners every week over the phone to review their work. It is sometimes not possible to speak with them if they are not answering their phones. It is helpful to provide answer sheets so learners can check their own work during our phone calls. They can discuss the problem questions this way.*

*Learners who are more comfortable with using digital technology complete assignments on electronic documents and email them back or they are reviewed during our regular phone conversations. One learner prints the documents, completes the required tasks, then scans the answer sheets, and emails these back to me. (What dedication!)*

*I think phone conversations are important because I can check in with how the learners are feeling. During the lockdown, learners may be feeling down and are not as cheery as usual. So, it's important to acknowledge their feelings, as this must happen before learning can occur. Some learners just wanted to wait until in-person classes resumed, and I had to respect their wishes. I made every attempt to stay in touch by phone to let them know what we were doing and to let them know I was thinking about them during covid-19 lockdown.*

*I feel that most learners have progressed at the pace they would have in face-to-face classes, despite the difficulties of transitioning to remote learning. – Silver Linings Café Participant, Ruth Smith, Essential Skills Upgrading (ESU), Toronto District School Board (TDSB)*

## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Camila

*.... When we started to work from home, we took... one week to prepare and immediately after, the second week, we started to provide online sessions with the students. We were developing, learning and "doing" at the same time. Since then, we have improved a lot. We are not using Canvas anymore. We have our own learning platform [Moodle]. It is a challenge because the students we have now are on top, they already know how it [the platform] works, but every time we add someone new, you need to start the whole process again. So now we are figuring out the steps. We are developing a procedure that is consistent. We use Moodle, which is very good because we can create our own content.*

*[To pivot] we started by identifying what we do. It may seem silly or obvious, but it's not. When you put on paper the whole process to deliver a class, there are so many things involved. So, this was the beginning. We worked day by day. The first week was more of a behind-the-scenes [planning]. All of the team worked together every day. We had many meetings on how we were going to transfer the content online. Before our classes were 10 to 2. We can't do this anymore.*

*Now we need to be 1 hour, or 2 hours tops with them. Everyone, not just the instructors, came together to think about this. At the same time, we were developing the content and Mark, [IT staff] was thinking, "how are we going to do this?". And I was contacting students. For the first month, I contacted them every day reminding them, "you have class today, here's the link, these are the hours. Let me know if you need any support." So, for the whole month, I contacted them every day, [asking] are you good, can you join the class today? On Friday there [are] no classes, so I would call them to do a check in, like a mental health check in..... even for those not in class. I was texting them and emailing them, to tell them we are together.... Second month, I did a check-in at the beginning of and the end of the week.*

*We have some computers, 8 or 9 computers, at the centre that the learners used during class. So, we borrowed them and Mark, the IT guy was driving them [to the learners]."*

**– Silver Lining Café Participant, Camila Geo de Oliveira, Centre of Learning and Development**

## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Anita

*When programs closed .... we thought how are we going to do this? We have to leave the building. I consulted with a mentor from the field. I said, how are you managing tutoring learner's through the COVID-19. She said, we are using Zoom. I got myself an account. It only allows me 45 minutes [free account]. It's a challenge. If I have to do more than two or three learners, how can you cover that much in 45 minutes? I decided to tutor them individually and this worked out as we moved through the lockdown.*

*Now, I probably have about 12 learners on Zoom. .... I have some in digital technology. I have a reading and writing group and also math [with] totally different levels. ....how do I go from the very beginner learner to one who is at a high level! That's why it gets a little bit stressful. So, I organized my work and kept an exercise book documenting where each learner was and updated it weekly with their progress and work that they needed to do in the next lesson. It's okay; I've got 45 minutes to support and teach my learners.*

*There is a learner; she's going through a hard time with her job. She was into a new role, temporary new role. They, [employer] knew that she didn't know a lot about emailing, but they wouldn't help her. So, she said, I need you to help me with emailing and Microsoft Outlook. I tried to get her on Zoom, but she wasn't able to understand how to download the Zoom software. So, I said, come into LAMP and bring your laptop. We will sit outside on the bench because we're not supposed to go into the building. She brought her computer and I had my PPE, my gloves and sanitizer, and I sanitized my hands and then I sanitized her computer. While she was sitting away two meters ... I tried to download Zoom, but it wouldn't load. So, I said, Okay, let me take your laptop into my building, ... and you can wait outside. She waited outside and I got a hold of my IT guy, he was so good. .... I'll only give you a few minutes he said. It just took a few minutes to have the Zoom program loaded on her computer. Then what I did was, I walked her through it, then I said do these steps three times. I want you to write down the instructions, read what you wrote down and do it yourself. And she did it and she was very happy. I hadn't worked with her since March, so this was great! ... I had tried to contact with her every week to try and get her to get on her computer and she was just so stressed out over her job and then her health and so many other things that she was going through... tomorrow I have her first Zoom appointment and she's so happy to finally connect and not feel so alone.*

*I had another learner that I mailed the [registration] packages out to and they sent them back signed and with a self-addressed stamp that I left in their package. We conversed over the phone to go over their questions and were able to process their intake and assessment in this way.*

*I also did a drive by and met my first math learner as she walked her dog. We sat 2 meters away with gloves on and went through the forms together. She signed them and I was able to take them back to the office and register her in April. I am very lucky to live close by to support our community. – Silver Lining Café Participant, Anita Dhanjal, LAMP Community Health Centre, Adult Literacy*

## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Trish

*During lockdown, I worked with a new learner with no access to technology. Compounding this problem, the learner had not yet received the learning package that I had mailed to him a week earlier. Telephone lessons work if both parties can at least see the same material (although, I'm sure some creative practitioners have found a solution, even for this challenge).*

*To work around this, I built a phone lesson around materials the learner had at home. We needed to find something we could both look at, so he wandered around to see what he could find. The Bible was the only book that he had nearby, so I asked him what version he had. Thankfully, you can find almost everything on the Internet! The learner would read a few verses of scripture over the phone, and then we could discuss the themes and go over new vocabulary from the passage.*

*Happily, the mail-out arrived shortly thereafter, and we soon had a wide variety of resources to use for lessons beyond those found in the King James Bible!* Silver Lining Café Participant, Trish Samuels, Essential Skills Upgrading, Toronto District School Board

### Alison

*I am teaching one-to-one. I am booking hour-long phone calls or videoconferences with each learner. I am finding that this is working better in many ways. We are supposed to create a learning plan for each learner. This one-to-one environment is allowing me to focus on each learner and their goals and needs in a different, a better way, than I can achieve in the classroom setting. It also allows me to meet the non-academic needs of some learners more effectively. For example, one learner's family is not that supportive of her learning and attendance at school. They expect her to work and participate in household upkeep duties during the day. I am able to meet with her in the evening when the work is done. I like that I have the ability to do this.* Silver Lining Café Participant, Alison Clarke, Essential Skills Upgrading, Toronto District School Board

## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Susy

..... my role as a supervisor is to work with the Literacy coordinators. We were given direction, in terms of what we were supposed to do. I was tasked with creating a new way of tracking our learners and volunteers during the pandemic. I created excel spreadsheets in which we tracked what day the pairs were working, what tools they were using (email, mail, Webex, Zoom, WhatsAPP, mail, etc) and we created folders to place any resources staff were giving the pairs. It gave us a quick way to see who was participating and who wasn't. If the learner/volunteer could not work together, we indicated the reasons and followed up to see if they would change their mind. Our folders included a Weekly Session Report whereby volunteers would indicate what they worked on specifically. Co-ordinators participated in connecting the volunteer and learner together by Zoom, WebeX, etc. We gave support to those who did not know how to use the technology. There were many phone calls back and forth with the learner and the volunteer. ...we did practice with Zoom [before attending the Silver Lining Café sessions]. But a lot of people didn't have a lot of information about Zoom. So, we were just making do with whatever we could in terms of communication tools. Some had iPads, laptops, iPhones and many just have flip phones with no camera. Our coordinators started with the phone and worked with each pair. Both Rachelle and I attended the Silver Lining zoom meetings as we received training and information on different tools that could help us. Our library system does not support Zoom but [did support] Webex, so it made working with some individuals a little more difficult. If learners or volunteers did not want to work on Webex, we used our own [personal] computers/phones to work with Zoom. We had to be flexible because we wanted our learners to continue to work with each other during Covid.

A lot of our learners are very low level. We mailed packages of resources (worksheets, readings) to those learners who did not have any tools to work online. We would email or snail mail the volunteer the same information. We did this to accommodate the volunteer. We had over 120 packages by April already mailed out. Rachelle or I would go into the library one day a week and complete this process for our coordinators. If staff could not find items from our online resources, we would scan items from the Adult Literacy office and mail those instead.

We also had to set up email accounts for some of the learners. We were able to get information from those learners who needed an online tool right at the beginning of our closure. We were able to secure some WIFI Hotspots for some of learners as well as some laptops. We had learners come to the branch and learn the basics of the laptop or Wi-Fi and work with them over the phone after the initial pick up. Some required more help than others. It depended on who was available at their home to help them.



## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Susy Cont.

*[There are learners who are waiting to return in person.] They tried with the phone. They were on the phone, like a landline. They had conversation [with volunteers], because we wanted to keep the volunteers calling them every week to ensure they tried to keep up with reading or writing. If volunteers could not do it, some of our coordinators stepped in and did follow up phone calls. If the learner could not work on the phone, we wrote the reason why on our files. After several weeks we would call back to find out if they wanted to re-start. Some did because they were able to get used to their kids being online with school and now had more time to devote to their learning. Others, however, could not handle it and said they would return when Covid was over.*

*It was slow at first. But once we started with our phone calls, I think a lot of learners and volunteers came on board. It becomes part of their weekly habit. They would get into a routine. Coordinators keep in touch with their volunteers to ensure all is going good and sometimes a volunteer will call and ask for something specific like homonyms and we would look for specific resources for them and send them out. - Silver Lining Café Participant, Susy Guadagnin, Toronto Public Library, Adult Literacy*

### Maxine

*We haven't had new learners because we are community based, which serves lower level learners. It's difficult because they don't have the computer skills and we have not been able to connect with them except via the telephone. .... and what has also been happening is that they are looking for more social and economic support. Many are not able to get in touch with their workers. Some of them are on Ontario Works. So it's been complicated.*

*Some want full time employment positions, but they don't know if that would affect their childcare subsidy. Right now, daycare is closed; they are wondering if they would be able to take full time employment and not jeopardize their childcare when things get back to normal. There are so many unanswered questions. It's a little stressful for the clients and I feel a little inadequate, because I don't have the answers and we're not able to get in touch with the OW workers.*

*We had 48 learners. After Covid, we served 6 learners online and about 12 by phone. It's difficult, but I understand because we weren't prepared for this. Learners don't have quiet spaces and there is interruption from the family with everybody being home.*

*Since 2015, we have been using Evernote as our main delivery method. Evernote is a online learner management system platform that allows you to save just about anything. We have been using it as our platform to serve learners. I have an instructor account and assign a notebook to each learner which includes their lessons.*



## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Maxine Cont.

*We do individualize learning, we don't do a group settings. So, what happens is when a learner comes in, we do an assessment and so on. We create their lessons; everything is put in an electronic notebook in Evernote. Evernote allows you to save videos, audios, PDFs, Word; just about everything. So all their lessons are placed in a notebook whether it's an attachment such as a PDF, or a Word document, or whether it's a video you want them to go to, or it's a website that you want them to go on to complete some online activity. Everything is in that notebook. Once they start, within the first two weeks or month, we help them to login because most of them come in with no digital skills. We show them how to get in and how to navigate within their notebook to access their lessons. After about a month, new learners are comfortable. By this time, they have memorized their login information. This initial support was all provided in person at the centre using the centre's computers. That was working well, so, I thought that it would be easy to continue with Evernote with them off site. However, I realized that the extra support coaching that we give on site was lacking offsite.*

*I found most of them did not have a laptop or a desktop. They had phones. None of them have internet. Some just have a data plan to check their emails. Those who do have a cell phone with data, have limited minutes. Some learners did not feel comfortable running up their data. When we were open, they came to the site and used our Wi Fi to check email and access Evernote..*

*What I found, is that learner confidence was lacking. To get them to download the Evernote app on their phones, I had to actually call them and walk them through the download process. They were not able to do it on their own from the App Store. There are a lot of challenges at the community base level because of the clients' literacy level.*

*A second issue is, they have to go into their browser on their phone to access their Evernote account, and some of them are not comfortable to this. You are trying to guide them through as you're talking to them on the phone. They are not that tech savvy for you to be able to talk them through the process on the same device. Because the phone is the only device they had, that fell through.*

*From the start whatever I tried, I documented it. I made notes of what I was trying, or how it was working, why it wasn't working, and then tried to use my notes to see how I could overcome an issue. I said to the other instructor, we need to figure out exactly what we're doing by September so that we have a strong rollout. We are testing different things at this point. We are working with AlphaPlus to find ways to make it easier for learners to login to Evernote. What we have done is to embed the Evernote link into the Google site. So now, instead of them logging into Evernote, they are now going to the Google site to just click on the link and it will take them to the Evernote. We are hoping now that this will make it easier to navigate. **Maxine Brown-Simpson, Silver Lining Café Participant, Literacy & Basic Skills Instructor, Dixon Hall***

## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Grace

*I went into the school twice, both times that I was given permission. I got some of my binders, with photocopies and some of my books. What I would do at first, (before I knew all this Zoom) is, I would scan materials and then email it all to the students... It was very time consuming. I would send them an exercise on a document, and I would say, "I'm going to be sending you something else. So hopefully, you will send me this document back within 3 days." Then they would email it [homework] back.*

*I would mark it and then send it back...It was such a long process. I was doing that two to three times a week. Anytime I received their homework I would mark it and send it back. Getting the information to them was easy for me, because luckily, I did have the resources. But they would be scanning and sending it back and some would print it first and just take a snapshot of their work and email it to me. To read it, I would have to enlarge it and it wasn't the best quality.*

*But since we started doing zoom and sharing the screen, letting them use the fill and sign [PDF feature] and allowing them to put in their answers, it's much better. When we started zoom, I would give them two days to complete an exercise. On the third day, we would get together and take it up as a group on Zoom. I was doing that twice a day because one [learner] didn't get up until noon and one was working. I would do a lesson in the morning and then take it up in the morning with whoever was available. And then we would do a two o'clock time slot. Whoever was available then, came. They had an option.*

*Not that I had all my class on Zoom. I have, 13 on my register; one does not have a computer or a cell phone. So, I kept in touch with her by phone, ... I would be in contact with her every two weeks or so. She had taken some books home for March break that I had in class. She took about three of them. I'm hoping once libraries open up, she'll be able to go to the library and check all my emails because that's the only way she can check her email. So that was the most difficult one.*

*I think about five joined the zoom class, but the others responded. A few of them were too busy with the children and so on. So, I would send out a general email just asking how are you doing? How are things going and they would respond. There's about four of them. One is stuck in Cuba. She went just before March Break to visit her mom and she is still there. She doesn't get internet all the time. ... there's maybe two or three that didn't respond at all, but the others were pretty good at letting me know. "Yes, I got your email. Thank you." One student was working part time and she was on zoom with us as well. We made sure we connected in the morning or even on Sundays. Sundays were good for her after church. Whatever worked for her. I just need them engaged. .... I would like to continue with the zoom [after we go back to the class.]. I was surprised how comfortable the learners became. The ones that I connected with, about five, were always there. I would let the other learners know.... "we had a great session today. Thank you for your input. Hope to see the others the next time". Silver Lining Café Participant, Grace Pasquino-Liotti, ESU, TDSB*

# What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020

## Judy

*I don't have an extra workspace or a desk. I sit at a different place at my dining room table from where I eat my meals. That's my change. I set that up a few years ago when I first started doing graduate work. I needed space to work at home and realized if I work where I eat, then it's all the same. But if I find a different spot to work from, that's good. I went out and bought office chair early on in the COVID pivoting. So that's different. I realized I'm going to be sitting at home longer, and I need something a bit more work-like than just my dining room chair, because after an hour at the dining room chair it wasn't very comfortable. I also went and bought a laptop stand and remote keyboard and mouse so that my work environment was a bit more ergonomic. Also having the camera at more or less eye level as opposed to the peering in option. I felt more professional. Then I thought about the background; nobody wants to see my dirty dishes, so I usually put a plant there. And then lighting as well. I started to notice that if I had the dining room light on it was a bit better than just the light from the window. I had a spot in my place that I knew would work. But it was just setting it up and taking it down every day. Work is done, so I moved the chair away.... having an end to your workday means you sit in a different chair. .... I knew that was an important right thing mentally.*

*[In the beginning] ...a lot of my work ... was more just keeping in touch with learners and supporting them as they were working with their kids for the most part. Looking back, if I set up a time, like I'm going to be here every day from 10 to 12, and three to four, that might have been a better way to go. What I did was start with what I usually do, start with the learners. When are you available? What times are good for you? Some were in the morning, some were in the afternoon, and so I'd have class meetings on different days at different times. I think that was confusing for some learners. [The scheduling part is quite tricky.] I think, if I contacted them more regularly by phone, that would have made a difference also. For many of them learning online is not something they're interested in or comfortable with. That was a big barrier.*

*We did do something really different. The art gallery [AGO] posted something about a new painting that they've just acquired of this young woman with an orange blossom. And it's a young woman of color. And they don't really know who the artist was or where it was painted. ... it's quite a fascinating picture because she's in 18th century formal dress, like, like a beautiful gown and lace. And so they're not sure, who is she and why is she dressed like this? Why is she holding orange blossom? There was interesting questions in a little discussion from some of the curators on an this article. So we looked at that a couple of times. That was a different thing and the students enjoyed that.*

## What Practitioners Told us in the Spring of 2020, Cont.

### Judy, Cont.

*The challenging part for sure, was engaging with learners online. They mostly have phones and they mostly use them to text or to do social media. So, if we had a platform on WhatsApp, that would have been much more accessible for them. Most of them have WhatsApp but I can't use my phone number [because of the privacy issue.] If I'd had a board phone, I would have been in there. So that was a challenging part, just not being able to use platforms that the learners are already familiar with.*

*[Another challenge] Just trying to teach them how to use technology online that I'm familiar with, and don't remember how I started on it. ... the best example is using the Libby app from the library. I use it all the time and I was encouraging them to download it. ... trying to talk them through it. Because the learner only has a phone, she can't hold her phone up to a camera on her laptop to show me what's on the phone so I can help.*

*[Going forward] I think I'd want to be doing things that are more interactive, either, where they get the story ahead of time and have answered the questions, but my students have never done homework. .... I think just the finding different ways of doing things; finding things that work online, on a phone that are interactive, that are accessible to people with low literacy, both media literacy and written literacy skills. That's a tall order. Silver Lining Café Participant, Judy Perry, ESU, TDSB*

## Testimonials: The Impact of Silver Lining Café

Here's what some of the participants had to say when asked: "What impact did the Silver Lining Café have on your practise?"

*"just hearing from other people and finding out that everyone was having the same issues made us feel a little less alone in our frustration and confusion. And just getting to see people and talk to people each week that I know (whose names I recognize from mailing lists), but I had never really met"*

*"makes you feel like you're not alone. ... you can spend most of your day just kind of sitting here wondering what you're supposed to be doing and wondering if you're doing enough. And so just to talk to other people, it's very important."*

*"I liked your model of sharing. I really like to hear what other teachers are doing."*

*"I also liked the way you presented things .... I got ideas from you about how to present material, how to do instructions. Just even having a nice opening PowerPoint type thing or just anything like that... I learned so many tips, you know..."*

*"knowing that you all had my back was honestly so important. I looked forward to the sessions. I maybe missed one meeting. I found the Silver Lining Cafe so helpful. All of you were extremely helpful, supportive, offering extra practice ...just to get me through it."*

*"... my work is isolated. at the best of times, and then the COVID made it much more isolated. And so Silver Lining was fantastic. And the little workshops you guys did on different ways to use zoom. And around the Google Docs. .... I'm pretty familiar with Google Docs, but you showed different ways to use the forums and how to share them when someone isn't using a Gmail address...it was very helpful."*

## Testimonials: The Impact of Silver Lining Café, Cont.

*"...what was really good, was we just weren't told, we were shown. And I'm a visual person. I need to see someone doing something. So yeah. And it was explained, and you guys took your time."*

*"Talking and chatting with one another is very helpful, so thanks for the forum to do that, I just need to be pointed in the right direction."*

*"I found that it was flexible. I liked the fact that, if you could attend, you could. I think it was good to listen because then we brought it back to the table when we had our one on one with the coordinators, and we would mention what other agencies were doing. I think the approach of the SL was very good. Your experts came on and talked about Zoom and what it can do for you, and how it works and ....what questions do you have...what do you still need help with? That was a perfect way of learning."*

*"Perfect model because it allowed us to share. I learned a lot from listening and from people's mistakes. Every time someone talked about a challenge, I learned a little bit. It allowed us to share on a level where you could say I have a problem with that, and you would get six people telling you this is how I solved it. That made it so comfortable and you wanted to come back. Anybody who had a little bit of knowledge was not afraid to share."*

*"It's been super effective for me. It been very meaningful, and I would continue to come. I would not have pivoted as smoothly as I did if it weren't for the cafes. Much gratitude for putting amazing resources together and the forum to process the whole experience...."*

*"Silver Lining Café allowed for openness. It was very relaxing, and people felt comfortable to share. The learning was done in a relaxed atmosphere."*

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