

Our process

The following are excerpts from our e-mail discussion as the first course unfolded.

Sent: Thurs, 27 Jan **From:** Tracey

I think we have 40 [people registered]...which is HUGE. Imagine if we had had time to do more outreach. You really tapped a need here.

I am worried about the numbers because it will mean so much reading for the learners if even a quarter of these people post. I am wondering if we should split them up once we get a sense of who is going to continue.

Sent: Sat, 29 Jan **From:** Nancy

I think we will just have to see how things go with the numbers. Not sure how we would split them up...but it is possible....I think each morning we will need to re-post the work for that week so learners who log in for the first time can find the original message from you.

Sent: Fri, 4 Feb **From:** Nancy

How are you doing? The report on who has completed the intro indicated that just one third of the registrants have checked in. Which is fine. I like your "We missed you" e-mail to those we haven't heard from. What do you think about numbers? Keep the next course open until the registration deadline? Break the group into two discussions if it gets this big or bigger? Wait for another week to see what happens with the level of participation with this first course? If 75 becomes 25 then maybe we are okay with the high initial registrations. I would hate to cut off someone who will participate because someone who won't has registered before and filled the spaces. What do you think about numbers?

Sent: Sat, 5 Feb **From:** Tracey

Let's see what happens this week. I am fine but I am worried that learners may be having trouble navigating the board and finding my replies. They post their replies in all kinds of places and, as those places slip from view, will they be able to find them and my reply? We'll see. I am a bit mind boggled but I am having a great time. This is so much fun and so interesting...so bring it on!

Sent: Wed, 2 Feb **From:** Nancy

Wow, there are some great responses from learners...some creative writers out there. And I am always impressed with learners who will post publicly when it is so obvious they are struggling with spelling and how to make use of the spell check feature. Obviously they all need some help learning how to follow threads and some learners need to learn about Topic titles and Subject lines.

Sent: Mon, 7 Feb **From:** Tracey

Not too many messages today but those few are real quality. I was excited to see the one from S—. Already she seems so much more confident in the way she talks about the poems. She was expressing a lot of doubt last week and this week she just said what she thought. And the exchange with C— was very interesting....Plus we heard from two or three people who had not posted before!

Sent: Wed, 9 Feb **From:** Nancy

I love the messages the learners are posting and tonight I gained a real appreciation for what F— brings to the course. Even though he isn't always on topic he, more than any other learner in the course, responds to other learners and affirms what they are posting. He really gets the virtual classroom and participates more interactively than anyone else. Have you noticed that?

Sent: Fri, 11 Feb **From:** Tracey

What an amazing day!!!! These people are remarkable. I had a little eye prickle when I read S—'s poem and G—'s reply. So much is happening here I cannot keep up in my head and heart.

Sent: Mon, 14 Feb **From:** Nancy

I'm blown away by the emerging online community potential of this as learners are beginning more in this third week to comment on each other's work, and by the creativity and thoughtfulness that underlies learner interaction with and understanding of the poems and activities. There is a real energy to this course and enthusiasm from the learners that breaks through the virtualness of it all.

I have wondered about responding to learners individually, rather than in groups and wonder if it

would be more or less work to respond in groups. It might encourage learners to interact with each other more. Respond to all who have written a poem affirming that fact and inviting them to reflect or comment on each other's poems. Some learners are starting to do that now. But group responses would cut down on the message count at your end and possibly save you time. Or not. What do you think?

Sent: Thurs, 17 Feb **From:** Tracey

Thanks for the feedback on my responses. I had been pondering just that but was having a hard time figuring out how to strike the balance between encouraging and validating individuals and supporting group interaction. I had just been thinking about why I felt compelled to interact with each person individually when that is not the usual way that online discussions go. I came to the conclusion that I was treating this as a course where feedback is required on each assignment, and as people are doing assignments individually they need individual feedback. I can see that people are writing with more confidence each time they post. Why is this happening? Is it practice? Is it because of the individual support? Is it support they are getting in the programs? I do not know. But I was reluctant to stop the individual interactions in case that was it. I was starting to refer to other learner's responses to encourage them to read each others' messages. I spoke to people at St. Chris and found out that they were not reading other learners' messages. It doesn't surprise me but it means there is not as much learner-to-learner interaction as there could be.

Tonight I responded to people who are working on old stuff individually and then dealt with Week 3 as a group. I am experimenting here to see what happens. I am hoping that it generates more discussion. I think that people have been a bit focused on task completion and not so much on exploring the richness of the messages. I think that it may be because I created a rather activity-driven curriculum. I was trying to give people the option of choosing to do something quite concrete or something more abstract and reflective, depending on their comfort level. I think that this is important. It seemed that in Weeks 1 and 2 most people chose the more reflective activities but that so far in Week 3 some people are struggling with this more abstract poem and are doing more of the concrete activities (lists of rhyming words as opposed to discussing the metaphors). I am reflecting on this and trying to figure out how to structure things for the rest of this course (and the next ones) so that people can work at their comfort level, experience

success, and interact both with the facilitator and other participants.

Sent: Wed, 22 Feb **From:** Nancy

I think your strategy to not respond to every participant's posting is a good one. And I also like the idea of breaking the students into groups for the next course. How will you do that?

Sent: Thurs, 23 Feb **From:** Tracey

Next time I want to try breaking the learners into three groups. I will give each group a web page to search and a short reading called "Food for Thought." I will ask them to find the information on the web and read "Food for Thought" and discuss an issue. I am going to make it clear that it is not finding the right answer that matters as much as how you discuss the issue. At the end of the week I will summarize each discussion. I will not reply to each learner but might get on to push the question if needed.

What are we learning?

Adult literacy students are equipped and eager to learn online. Once we analyze participation rates, technical problems, individual evaluations by participants, and follow-through to completion, we will know what changes to the design and learning environment will make the learning easier for future courses.

Will they come if we offer online courses? You bet! ■

Nancy Friday is a seasoned literacy practitioner who worked for 15 years in community-based literacy programs in Toronto. Now Coordinator of AlphaRoute, the web-based learning environment managed by the AlphaPlus Centre, she handled the administrative and technical problem-solving aspects of launching the new online courses.

Tracey Mollins was hired by AlphaPlus to design and facilitate the first three online courses in AlphaRoute.