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# Background on the Deaf e-Channel

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The Guide

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Deaf Literacy Initiative

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## Introduction

The **Background on the Deaf e-Channel: The Guide** document was developed by Deaf Literacy Initiative (DLI) as a response to a need, which is to answer questions new field representatives and managers of the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) often ask about the history and development of the e-Channel in the Deaf cultural stream under the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS). Many field representatives and managers are required to keep their information current; the Guide will be a resource that will answer most, if not all, questions. Sections on language acquisition, challenges and barriers of Deaf and Deaf-blind LBS learners and practitioners, and technology requirements of the e-Channel will give the field representatives a better understanding of the cultural and linguistic needs of the Deaf and Deaf-blind literacy communities. An understanding of the issues in the Deaf cultural stream will then bridge the perception gap of the time, cost, and quality materials the e-Channel project truly needed to establish a relevant online learning portal in the Deaf cultural stream.

The guide contains three references, which are:

- a glossary of terms used within the Deaf and Deaf-blind communities;
- a list of works cited;
- a list of relevant websites.

DLI continues to strive for collaboration with MTCU “to advance and empower the Deaf and Deaf-blind literacy community” (Deaf Literacy Initiative, 2011) and thanks MTCU for its support in the development and implementation of the e-Channel in the Deaf cultural stream.

## **What is e-Channel?**

The Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) prioritizes Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) as one of its program offerings that is crucial to long-term retention of knowledge and skills of learners; it will lead them to greater success in employment and training upon exiting LBS programs.

One of the educational approaches in LBS is flexible learning. This approach is a part of LBS program delivery in all four cultural streams – Aboriginal, Francophone, Deaf, and Anglophone where learners can access literacy upgrading in various learning environments, regardless of place or time. It blends technology and learning methods to maximize the learners' potential at a distance. Different ways of flexible learning include online learning, video conferencing, and software programs. In addition to the adaptability and convenience of flexible learning, it addresses common obstacles of potential learners to attend LBS programs such as:

- limited access to a literacy program because of work commitments or family obligations;
- lengthy and/or costly commute between home and literacy program;
- non-existent literacy program in a catchment area;
- inaccessibility to the literacy network for those with disabilities, especially those living in rural areas.

In 2000, MTCU granted funding to a provincial literacy organization, AlphaPlus, to create an online literacy program within its website called AlphaRoute. Encouraged by the number of learners participating in activities through AlphaRoute, MTCU extended its scope of flexible learning to all four cultural streams for a new initiative, the e-Channel strategy. The vision of the e-Channel was “a web-based way to deliver LBS training that improves access for Ontarians who choose or are in need of independent distance learning” (MTCU, 2013). In 2006, three delivery agencies – Sioux Hudson Literacy Council (Aboriginal), Coalition Ontarienne de Formation des Adultes (Francophone), and Avon-Maitland District School Board (Anglophone)

were chosen, based on submitted Calls for Proposal, and established their e-Channels by 2008. The Deaf Upgrading Program of George Brown College was chosen to complete the website, Deaf Learn Now, in the Deaf cultural stream from 2011 to 2012.

All four cultural streams now offer quality programming in their LBS programs that no potential learner will be turned away or fall through the cracks because of the e-Channels that provide every possible opportunity for potential learners to upgrade literacy skills.

### **What is the challenge of language acquisition?**

To understand the challenge of language acquisition Deaf and Deaf-blind learners have in learning a second language, it is important to begin with an overview on the natural language of deaf people. Many deaf persons throughout the world, along with some deaf-blind persons, who identify themselves as culturally Deaf communicate in sign languages of their native countries or regions. For example, British Deaf people communicate in British Sign Language while Deaf Quebecers use langue des signes Quebecois. In North America, many Deaf persons of the English-using majority communicate in American Sign Language (ASL). Even for those who are socially isolated from their local Deaf communities instinctively gesture and devise a system of home signs to communicate with their family members and other individuals. While international sign languages differ in phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, the basic definition of sign language is shared by many Deaf persons: a language consisting of hands, facial expressions, and bodily shifts that set the tone and meaning of their messages. The visual and spatial nature of most sign languages is not easily captured in writing as there is no written equivalent that most spoken languages would have. Like ASL, sign languages stand on their own with their linguistic rules. They tie Deaf and Deaf-blind persons to form relationships, share knowledge, and shape their culture integral to their identities and sense of community.

While the learners of Aboriginal, Francophone, and Anglophone LBS programs are learning to write in the language they speak already, many Deaf and Deaf-blind learners who communicate in ASL must learn a second language, written English. Some people believe ASL is a replication of written English, but it is not. ASL and written English are two separate languages, which

makes language acquisition amongst Deaf and Deaf-blind learners complex. One sign or two in ASL can convey a concept that written English will require a number of words in a sentence to express the same (or equivalent) concept. With ASL as the primary language of instruction in the Deaf and Deaf-blind LBS programs, many of the practitioners are faced with a dual challenge: convey instruction clearly in ASL that learners will understand to apply towards their reading and writing lessons. The andragogy of the Deaf cultural stream necessitates language acquisition of a second language from Deaf and Deaf-blind students. For some, it is both – becoming completely fluent in one language (in most cases, it would be ASL) while learning written English simultaneously.

Apart from the inherent linguistic differences between ASL and written English, there are other factors that play a role in second-language acquisition. For some native ASL users with limited English literacy skills, the main reason is an ineffectual and deficient Deaf educational system in place many years ago where oralism and modified sign languages (i.e. Signed Exact English) were the methods of instruction practised by non-Deaf teachers. For some others who are not fully fluent in ASL, yet learning to master written English, various reasons are inaccessibility to Deaf education and support services, limited exposure to ASL, and social isolation, to name a few. Other factors such as visual and learning disabilities apply to both categories of learners. Many educational advocates support a Deaf educational model of bilingualism and biculturalism, which is in place at Deaf provincial schools and some Deaf departments in mainstream schools; the model optimizes the prime learning years of Deaf and Deaf-blind children to learn both languages, ASL and written English, with mastery. It is expected many of the children will be native users of both languages by the time they reach post-secondary age. As for Deaf and Deaf-blind adults improving their written English skills at a later age, it takes effort and patience to handle the complexity of second-language acquisition so they can find employment or advance in the workforce or participate in training programs.

### **What are other challenges of Deaf and Deaf-blind learners?**

In addition to language acquisition and general barriers identified in the What is e-Channel? section, there are other challenges some Deaf and Deaf-blind learners have that were acknowledged in the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum: Report on Program and Service

Delivery Gaps (2010), which are:

- limited provisions and access of user-friendly (especially for Deaf-blind learners) and bilingual resources outside of the program;
- limited access to specific technology for Deaf-blind learners, especially those who opted to enrol in a Deaf LBS program near home;
- preferred anonymity and privacy of one's home;
- low self-esteem or low self-image or other emotional compromises that hinder them from attending;
- limited advancement to higher literacy levels because either instruction is not offered in the Deaf or Deaf-blind program or ASL interpreting services are not offered by non-Deaf LBS programs.

The additional challenges stemmed from additional disabilities, emotional compromises, and lack of accessibility, which are somewhat common in a culture that is marginalized in the Canadian society. The website of Deaf Learn Now addressed most challenges, if not all, Deaf and Deaf-blind learners had in attending a Deaf or Deaf-blind LBS program.

### **What were the concerns of the e-Channel?**

Prior to the phases one and two of Research and Development of the e-Channel project, DLI and the stakeholders of the focus group initially grappled with the vision and implementation of the e-Channel in the Deaf cultural stream. They were concerned, first and foremost, the online learning environment of the e-Channel may not measure up to the quality of face-to-face instruction Deaf and Deaf-blind learners receive. However, Dr. Sherida Ryan of the Ontario Deaf Literacy Capacity Assessment report gathered the stakeholders' answers on features of an ideal Deaf online literacy environment, which were:

- interactive instruction in ASL such as video logs and scripted scenes, along with accompanying text, in online lessons;

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- access to IT support to troubleshoot issues with the website and hardware;
- participation in Deaf culture within the online learning environment that is integral to learners' social network and cultural identity;
- direct contact with the instructor, with the mandate of a reply within a specified time period;
- relevant lessons that meet learners' goals in independence, employment, and academia;
- access to high-speed Internet, with a working computer equipped with a webcam;
- bilingual resources and activities outside of the e-Channel that continue to support experiential learning.

Many practitioners in the Deaf stream are native signers or speakers in one language with a working knowledge or near fluency in another. For this reason, most of them were not prepared to take the lead in overseeing the e-Channel project and meeting deliverables because the project demanded quality online curriculum that truly supported bilingualism and biculturalism, along with training in nine Essential Skills. The online curriculum must meet the frameworks of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum as mandated by LBS, intensifying the complexity of the goals for the Deaf e-Channel. In the aforementioned report, the lead researcher, Dr. Ryan, identified further challenges of developing and implementing the e-Channel, which were:

- limited expertise of the stakeholders to plan, develop, and implement online lessons;
- limited resources and training in online andragogical education offered to stakeholders within a Deaf educational sphere;
- lack of valid and reliable linguistic assessment tools to determine learners' skills;
- added time and cost of recruiting Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to translate documents into ASL, tape ASL videos, edit and upload videos online, etc.;

- out-dated computer hardware, software, peripherals, and other equipment in literacy programs that may not meet the technical requirements of developing online tools and a website from scratch;
- a disconnected practitioner network to share ideas and lessons in face-to-face and online instruction.

On top of the challenges identified by Dr. Ryan, the Deaf e-Channel took three factors of project management into consideration when planning and implementing: time, cost, and quality. Unlike the cost-effective auditory tools (i.e. podcasts) used in e-Channels in other non-Deaf streams, Deaf and Deaf-blind learners require online lessons to be presented in both languages, ASL and written English, which increased the cost, time, and quality to produce the e-Channel. While there were concerns about the viability of the e-Channel that would meet deliverables and come under budget, MTCU, DLI, George Brown College, and stakeholders were confident an appropriate online learning portal for Deaf and Deaf-blind learners could be done.

## **What is the background on the Deaf e-Channel?**

This section gives readers an in-depth overview on the e-Channel project and its background. Each key decision or event is listed chronologically, with details.

**2000:** AlphaPlus developed AlphaRoute, an online learning program within the website for learners interested in online learning.

**2006 – 2008:** MTCU granted funding to three cultural streams – Aboriginal, Francophone, and Anglophone – to establish their e-Channels. They were completed by 2008.

**July 2009:** John Milloy of MTCU announced a funding of \$500,000 was set aside for the Deaf stream to begin the development of e-Channel for the Deaf and Deaf-blind learners. The development began six months later.

**December 2009:** Deaf Literacy Initiative used a portion of the earmarked funds – approximately \$260,000 – to update the existing technologies of the 14 Deaf and Deaf-blind literacy programs throughout Ontario. The procured items and services were:

- SMART Boards, laptops, and cables;
- video conferencing equipment (Polycom) with accompanying 40” inch flat-screen televisions;
- expertise of an IT technician hired by DLI to visit each program and configure the technologies to Internet for ease of use amongst practitioners;
- additional funding of \$600 per program for Internet services for one year to meet the technical system requirements of the new equipment.

The technological upgrading of the 14 Deaf and Deaf-blind LBS programs ensured their preparation for and immediate response to both incidental opportunities and scheduled lessons at a distance. It also allowed practitioners to become familiar with the uses of the new technology before the establishment of the Deaf e-Channel.

**December 2009:** DLI and MTCU had several meetings to discuss the parameters of the Deaf e-Channel, and DLI provided an ASL translation of the e-Channel overview in a video uploaded to its website. After further discussion with MTCU, they agreed on the following two ideas: a focus group of stakeholders, mostly practitioners, on the vision of e-Channel in the Deaf cultural stream and a committee to investigate the capacity of the 14 Deaf and Deaf-blind LBS programs to support and incorporate the e-Channel model as a part of service delivery.

**January 2010:** DLI and MTCU hosted the first focus group to discuss the members' vision of the e-Channel. DLI proposed the idea of researching the programs' capacities to handle the demands of the e-Channel it may bring to the Deaf stream, and many members showed favour for the project.

**February 2010:** MTCU granted additional funding of \$200,000 for a research initiative to survey the capacities of all 14 LBS programs to deliver instruction at all five LBS levels and to contribute to the development of the e-Channel in the Deaf literacy stream. Three organizations banded together to form the Deaf LBS Capacity Assessment committee. They were Impact ASL of the Canadian Hearing Society for regional network support, Deaf Upgrading Program of

George Brown College for financial management and DLI for leadership. MTCU representatives and ASL interpreters were a part of the committee as well.

The committee recruited a lead researcher, Dr. Sherida Ryan of OISE at University of Toronto, to determine the capacity of all 14 LBS programs and make recommendations for the most successful outcome of the implemented e-Channel. The study was crucial because of the unique learning needs of Deaf and Deaf-blind students to which none of the e-Channels in the other three literacy streams could be adapted in the Deaf stream.

The committee and Dr. Ryan met once a month over a period of ten months to go over the research, discuss outcomes, and recommend options for the e-Channel in the Deaf stream.

**March 2010:** The members of the Deaf LBS Capacity Assessment committee visited the National Technical Institute of the Deaf (NTID), a college of Rochester Institution of Technology, in Rochester, New York. The agenda included four items, which were:

- a meeting with Joan Naturale, a Deaf librarian of the NTID Library, who liaised with the professors of the Liberal Arts department to provide online learning opportunities for students wanting to enhance their learning of the material as well as writing skills outside of the classroom;
- a meeting with Michael Starenko, Instructional Design Consultant, who collaborated with professors to design and develop the online courses accordingly to professors' curriculum, complete with learning outcomes;
- a meeting with Ian Weber, Senior Manager of Academic Technologies and Media Services, on media captioning and transcription of videos;
- meetings with Dr. Gary Long and six NTID faculty and staff members on the benefits and issues of blended learning model (a mixture of face-to-face time and online learning) for students.

The members of the committee found this trip to be encouraging because there were software programs, relevant online learning activities, and services that could be applied towards the development of the e-Channel in the Deaf stream.

**June 2010:** Dr. Sherida Ryan submitted a preliminary report of her findings to the Deaf LBS Capacity Assessment committee and MTCU.

**August 2010:** The members of the Deaf LBS Capacity Assessment committee travelled to Gallaudet University to learn about its programs beneficial to the construction of the web-based curriculum and development of the e-Channel. The four items on the agenda were:

- meetings with Mona Blanchette McCubbin and Larry Musa, Global Education Specialist, of the International Programs and Services on academic and work opportunities they provide to international students such as courses at other nearby universities and internships;
- meetings with Jimmy Challis Gore and Alexander Quaynor, instructors of English Language Institute, on techniques they employed in teaching English-as-a-Second-Language, one of which is Manipulative Visual Language, a system of 3D tools to identify and manipulate parts of speech;
- a meeting with Sheri Youens-Un of e-Learning program on the use of the software program, ECHO 360, in the course management system, Blackboard;
- meetings with Wei Wang and Thomas Allen of a research initiative, Visual Learning and Visual Language (VL2), on their testing of a theory in using a particular method to teach Deaf children ASL and written English simultaneously and providing analysis of classroom environment between teacher and students to recommend best educational practices for the teacher.

The members noted the relevant courses offered by the university were applicable in Deaf adult education, which the LBS practitioners would benefit from taking. As it was with the first field trip to NTID in March, the members were confident the establishment of the e-Channel would be successful in the Deaf cultural stream.

**September 2010:** The focus group met again for the second time at the offices of MTCU to discuss the vision of the e-Channel in the Deaf stream. MTCU invited four presenters to detail the implementation and management of their e-Channel initiatives in the other three literacy streams – to give the Deaf and Deaf-blind practitioners an understanding of what the e-Channel would involve. After lengthy discussions, Peter Solomon of MTCU and DLI concluded another meeting was needed – this time with only the Deaf stream practitioners to give input.

**September 2010:** MTCU sent the Call for Proposal to the 14 LBS Deaf and Deaf-blind programs on taking the lead in the e-Channel project.

**November 2010:** The focus group met for the third time. MTCU and DLI hired a facilitator, Heather Marsden, to manage the roundtable discussion amongst the Deaf literacy stream practitioners; the practitioners finally reached a consensus on the vision and requirements of the e-Channel. During the meeting, the Deaf Upgrading Program of George Brown College informed the group they submitted the Call for Proposal application. None of the other 13 LBS programs submitted. The staff of the program presented their proposal, and the majority of the group expressed its approval, supporting George Brown College to take the lead in the e-Channel project.

**November 2010:** The Deaf LBS Capacity Assessment committee hosted an event on November 24, 2010 to report its research findings on the strengths and weaknesses in the capacities of the 14 LBS programs, along with recommendations, as cited in the Ontario Deaf Literacy Capacity Assessment report. The lead researcher, Dr. Sherida Ryan, compiled the data that was collected through different interviewing and surveying methodologies conducted by research assistants over a period of ten months. The report analyzed the demographics, budgets, and technical capacities and skills of all of the programs. Then, it touched on the common themes many of the interviewees stressed for the e-Channel to be successful in the Deaf stream, which were: organizational requirements, technology requirements, social and cultural requirements, needs of Deaf-blind, and enthusiasm for the e-Channel. Dr. Ryan concluded in the findings that “access for Deaf and Deaf-blind students will require adaptive technology and resources and practitioner development training for literacy learning to be successful” (Ontario Deaf Literacy Capacity Assessment Report, 2010).

The interviewees of the report were program managers, practitioners, and learners, which the committee emphasized the report to be an honest representation of the answers gathered from the Deaf cultural stream in Ontario.

**January 2011:** MTCU approved the Call to Proposal by the Deaf Upgrading Program of George Brown College and granted the remaining earmarked funds of \$235,000 for the Research and Development phase for a period of January 2011 to March 2012. It requested George Brown College to partner with the Canadian National Institute of the Blind (CNIB) Hamilton because the latter organization developed online learning activities using Moodle, an open-source learning platform. George Brown College revised its Call to Proposal to reflect this detail. However, the partnership was cancelled when CNIB Hamilton pointed out it did not have the capacity to meet the requirements of the technology used in the project. George Brown College entered a partnership with Durham Deaf Services instead to develop online learning activities and conduct research on the appropriate Learning Management System (LMS) with video capabilities.

The path both organizations took in the Research and Development phase included the following:

- a research report on latest developments and research on e-learning of Deaf adults in LBS and non-LBS programs, along with a summary of the environmental scan of online technology and programming in Deaf education (phase one);
- selection of the learning management system, Topyx, as the most suitable (phase one);
- collaboration with Garnet Bailey of L-MAD to develop the website (phase two);
- creation of an online ASL dictionary titled, Word of the Day (phase two);
- implementation of Social Networking Tool (closed to registered learners only (phase two);
- development of the online classroom, using MOODLE applications (phase two);

- assessment of the tools and classroom at different LBS sites to test usability, gather feedback, and modify features (phase two);
- establishment of an e-Channel advisory group and selection of the name, Deaf Learn Now (phase two).

The Research and Development phase of the e-Channel project concluded in 2012. Deaf Learn Now is now a part of the program delivery under the School of Work and College Preparatory at George Brown College.

## Summary

While the project management of the Deaf e-Channel required time, money, and quality resources, it was especially important to produce a high-quality website that promoted bilingualism of ASL and written English and incorporated best practices in online education appropriate for Deaf and Deaf-blind LBS learners. The end goal, ultimately, was to maximize the return on investment (ROI). As a result, Deaf Learn Now is the product of well-thought out careful research and planning that is accessible, interactive, and, most of all, relevant for Deaf and Deaf-blind learners, so they may go on to achieve personal, educational, and employment goals – the true ROI.

DLI hopes readers have most of their questions answered while reading the **Background on the Deaf e-Channel** guide. For more information, refer to appendices. Please contact DLI if answers to questions are not found in the guide.

## Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

**American Sign Language (ASL):** a visual-gestural language with a recognized grammatical, morphological, syntactical, phonological, and discourse structure, and is the official language members of the Deaf communities in North America (Ladd, 2003).

**Andragogy:** practice of educating adults in an extended learning environment, such as Literacy and Basic Skills programming, Continuing Education courses, and so on (Selman, 2001).

**Biculturalism:** the practice of switching between two cultures (i.e. Deaf culture and Canadian society) with ease, knowing and following the social conventions and expectations of each culture.

**Bilingualism:** the ability to communicate in two languages comfortably with fluency.

**deaf:** a person who has some degree of hearing loss; note the lowercase letter of ‘d.’

**Deaf:** a person who is either born Deaf or deafened late in early childhood, whom utilizes American Sign Language as their first language and is heavily immersed within the Deaf community, culture, and history within their daily life experiences (Ladd, 2003); note the uppercase letter of ‘D.’

**Deaf-blind:** a culturally Deaf person with low vision or limited use of vision.

**Non-Deaf:** a person who has full hearing abilities; also means “hearing.”

**Oralism:** an educational approach in teaching Deaf children to hear, lip-read, and speak in the classroom, not permitting them to sign.

**Signed Exact English:** a system of manual communication that follows the exact representation of English structure (Canadian Association of the Deaf, date unknown).

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(A PDF copy is available online at [www.deafliteracy.ca/projects/projects-funded-ministry-training-colleges-and-universities/reports](http://www.deafliteracy.ca/projects/projects-funded-ministry-training-colleges-and-universities/reports).)

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## Appendix C: Websites

In the listing below, some of the key details or events have links to websites that provide more information for your interest.

Avon-Maitland District School Board – Learning Hub: [www.learninghub.ca/Home.aspx](http://www.learninghub.ca/Home.aspx)

Coalition Ontarienne de Formation des Adultes – Le service de formation a distance pour adultes de l’Ontario: [www.sefad.ca](http://www.sefad.ca) and [www.coalition.ca](http://www.coalition.ca)

Deaf Literacy Initiative: [www.deafliteracy.ca](http://www.deafliteracy.ca)

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Gallaudet University – e-Learning: <http://acadtech.gallaudet.edu/echo360studio.xml>

Gallaudet University – English Language Institute: [www.green-bridge.org](http://www.green-bridge.org)

Gallaudet University – Visual Language and Visual Learning: <http://VL2.gallaudet.edu>

George Brown College - Deaf Learn Now: [www.deafeducationonline.ca](http://www.deafeducationonline.ca)

LBS Capacity Assessment Report event: [www.deafliteracy.ca/lbs-capacity-event](http://www.deafliteracy.ca/lbs-capacity-event)

MTCU announcement of funding: <http://news.ontario.ca/tcu/en/2009/07/literacy-and-basic-skills-training-to-expand.html>

MTCU – Literacy Basic Skills: [www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/programs/lbs.html](http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/programs/lbs.html)

Sioux Hudson Literacy Council – Good Learning Anywhere: <http://goodlearninganywhere.com>