

Blended Learning in the BC Context – *Digging Deep*

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

RiseUP! started out as an idea I had for a program that I had wanted to do for many years. As a *Person with Disabilities* (and more accurately a woman with disabilities), I knew how challenging it was to ‘Rise Up’ with respect to work. My own experience was one of many roadblocks and challenges that led to a strong determination, perseverance, and extraordinary resiliency. Having reached the pinnacle of success in my field, I wanted to help other women to ‘Rise Up’.

We were very fortunate to have a number of women on staff who either had significant experience working with women with disabilities or were themselves disabled. We were able to put together a great Team of experienced staff to develop the program in response to a Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training bid. Our program was evaluated in the category of Persons with Disabilities, and the only organization who had a program specializing in women.

RiseUP! provides participants with tools, specialized training, and supports they need to remove barriers and move successfully upwards along the labour market continuum, leading to sustainable employment or self-employment. We use a customized Learning Management System (LMS) as our platform, as well as Zoom, Discord, and other tools based on participant needs/abilities. We have found blended learning to yield greater participation among rural and remote participants as well as Persons with a Disability who may not have access to transportation, many who are avoiding public transportation during the pandemic. Our fluid and hybrid technology services mean we leave no person behind. They can access our Team and LMS from their phone, computer, or tablet. We have removed the barrier of needed materials, situational barriers, racism or perception of racism, and gender. In addition, there is an increased need for mental health supports as a result of the pandemic. *Rise Up* has an experienced Employment Counsellor on staff to provide supports and make appropriate referrals for participants as a measure to improve long term success and sustainable employment outcomes.

Program Outline - Rise Up is an 18-week program, 6 weeks in class and 12 in Employment Experiences and Training. We implement a dynamic blended model of programming comprised of skills training, guest speakers, targeted webinars and breakout. Participants participate in virtual interactive cultural workshops such as “Building a Dream...Catcher”. Participants are engaged in the program (online

synchronously or asynchronously) five hours per day, five days per week (25 hours per week unless an alternative accommodation arrangement has been made).

3	WEEK 3, Day 1  <i>Legal Issues: Your Rights at Work.</i> <i>Guest Speaker: Micro Credentials</i>	WEEK 3, Day 2 <i>Building an Internal/External Support System</i> <i>Knowing Your Worth.</i> <i>Self-Care and Wellness at Work.</i> <i>Work Accommodations & self-advocacy</i>	WEEK 3, Day 3 <i>Researching companies & identifying leads</i> <i>Individual Presentations</i>	WEEK 3, Day 4 <i>Self-Employment for PWD's – How to Get Started, an Intro-Workshop</i> <i>Guest Speaker: Female Entrepreneur/Self Employment</i>	WEEK 3, Day 5  <i>Social Media profiles</i> <i>Online course: Social Media Marketing</i>
4	WEEK 4, Day 1  <i>Cultural safety & reconciliation</i>	WEEK 4, Day 2 <i>Hidden Job Market</i> <i>Recruiters, Job Fairs</i> <i>Networking</i> <i>Information Interview</i>	WEEK 4, Day 3 <i>Personal Well-Being</i> <i>Work/Life Balance</i> <i>Self-awareness</i> <i>Dealing with change</i>	WEEK 4, Day 4 <i>Communication: Assertive Communication.</i> <i>Exploring & establishing boundaries.</i>	WEEK 4, Day 5 <i>Online course: Networking</i> <i>Guest Speaker: Components of a Business Plan/Bootcamp</i>

The RiseUP!! Program is offered online, on Vancouver Island, Powell River and the Gulf Islands.

About halfway through the year (2021), I took an OLTD course that challenged our perceptions about how video conferencing and PowerPoint affected marginalized, inclusion and rural and remote populations. It was an eye opener, based on research by Tony Bates¹, a leading voice for online learning for many years, and an advocate for digital access. I wrote a White Paper on the subject (see attached - *Digital Access to Programs and Services in the Employment and Training Sector*) and decided that it would be irresponsible of us to have this knowledge and not do anything about it. Subsequently I hired 3 of my classmates (Janessa, Keith and Megan) from OLTD in the summer of 2021 to start working with program staff to move from synchronous delivery to a revised blended learning model, with much more of a focus on asynchronous delivery. I have since had other classmates ask to work with ETHOS next summer.

I am incredibly proud of the work we have done and how we have helped women to **RiseUP!**

STAFF POSITIONS (for those who contributed information)

As part of my research, I interviewed the following staff about their experience with the program and blended learning format, as listed below.

Program Director

The Program Director provides direction and leadership toward the achievement of agreement goals and objectives. The Director is responsible for overall administrative activities relating to the management of the agreement. The Director oversees Finance, Human Resources and Operations and provides the overall leadership for the project in planning, administering and evaluating services, and is directly accountable for the implementation of the agreement.

Program Manager (PM)

The PM supervises the Team and is responsible for overseeing all participant activities. The Manager leads the day-to-day *participant service* delivery and provides ongoing leadership of a team of professional staff,

¹ Tony Bates, "Online learning and (k-12) schools: 2. Technology and cost issues" (Vancouver: Online Learning and Distance Education Resources, 2021).

plans and manages participant service delivery, and provides strategy and advice on long-term employment issues and trends. The PM's main responsibilities include service delivery management, quality assurance, human resources management, and program administration. The Program Manager works closely with the Program Director.

Employment Counsellor (EC)

The Employment Counsellor completes assessments as required with the participant, and provides employment counselling to eligible participants through career planning and development, occupation selection and work search strategies. The Counsellor's main priorities are counselling, referring participants to appropriate internal and/or community resources. The Counsellor collaborates with participants to identify barriers to unemployment, clarify employment difficulties, while determining strategies to overcome them, and where appropriate refer to additional services for further assistance.

Online Facilitator

The Online Facilitator is responsible for facilitating group workshops and orientations, including Job Clubs, using adult learning techniques and assessing transfer of learning. Priorities include developing and updating workshop curriculum in response to trends and participant feedback, and teaching participants effective employment-related strategies.

Job Developer (JD)

The Job Developer works with both the EC and participant to enhance participant ability to find and maintain employment (e.g., goal setting, resume writing, interview skills, targeted job search, etc.) and, in some situations, provide onsite job coaching. The Job Developer works within the employer community, with community organizations and individual employers, to identify placement opportunities, address skill gaps, organize job fairs and facilitate employer forums. The Job Developer's main priorities are to connect participants with local employers, generate part-time/full-time paid and unpaid placements, job shadowing and informational interviews; assist wage subsidy participants to secure employment, assist participants and employers with job maintenance and monitor participant progress.

Instructional Design Intern

Our Instructional Design Intern was hired to help us move from a synchronous model to a more blended synchronous/asynchronous delivery model. She was instrumental, having to first learn and understand the program and model, and then work working with the Team to make changes, based on their feedback and the new knowledge she had recently learned in OLTD.

TYPE OF BLENDED LEARNING

As described in Assignment 1, there is no direct match to the K-12 system as the RiseUP! Program does not fit into *typical* definitions of blended learning. Blended learning is usually defined as spending part of one's time in a brick-and-mortar location away from home, and another portion of time learning online. RiseUP! participants do not attend any brick-and-mortar location at any point during the program.

However, this definition could be modified by suggesting the synchronous morning sessions from 10am-12pm could mirror a brick-and-mortar environment, while the asynchronous afternoons mirror the

online learning part of the definition. To adapt the RiseUP! Program to be fully blended as per K-12 definitions, participants would need to attend class in-person.

If we consider other definitions, RiseUP! is learning that involves the thoughtful integration of online learning and one-to-one counselling or coaching, either virtual or in-person. As a subset, RiseUP! contains the combination of two or more elements being blended, combining delivery media (LMS and ZOOM) and instructional methods (asynchronous and synchronous).

BENEFITS FOR LEARNERS/FACILITATORS/ORGANIZATION/COMMUNITY

Learners

The benefit of this system is that participants are able to *manage their time* as needed, and learn at their own pace. Because the afternoons are asynchronous, many participants choose to complete that part of the course later in the evening, depending on their schedule. It supports the participants to work later in the evenings, when children are in bed (allowing for *integration* of home responsibilities), or work at *their best time* of the day. Asynchronous learning provides the *opportunities* to be working/volunteering during the daytime and the classroom projects can be done any time after the morning webinars. It also enables the participants to be *available* during the daytime and working hours, to be available to go for job interviews.

The *flexibility* takes into consideration issues for Persons with Disabilities (PWD), such as pain, exhaustion, bathroom issues and related. Participants do not have to sit in front of a computer for 5 hours straight – it can be broken up. As well, one of the advantages of the RiseUP! Program being fully synchronous and asynchronous is that women with disabilities do not need to figure out *accommodations* for in-person classes. For many, this can be a significant hurdle to overcome.

Learners of the RiseUP! Program report significant mental health impacts related to COVID-19: isolation, lack of supports, lack of knowledge regarding integrating into the workforce. The synchronous and asynchronous model supports the need for *group connection* while *enhancing independence*. This transition is different for each participant and support staff are critical to guide the participants through what can be difficult transitions.

Some participants need *more structure* and *more instruction* and some work and learn better on their own. Our program provides that opportunity so all can *learn at their best*. For the learner themselves, they feel a *sense of accomplishment* – without having to compare themselves to classmates – it's all about them being able to reach their goals.

Facilitators (Teachers)

Our online Program Facilitator was one of the more vocal employees to respond to my questions. In addition to the Facilitator, as described earlier we also have an Employment Coach and Job Developers as part of the 'Success Team'.

Staff indicate that they now have *more time* to help participants 1-1, in general. When most of the participants are doing assignments on their own (asynchronously), it provides the ability for Facilitators to work 1:1 with other participants that need the individual support to be able to *keep up to the group*.

They are able to work with participants 1:1 in the afternoons and have the *flexibility* to get through so much more for those that need it and for those that don't, they can continue on their own. In other words, the Facilitator is able to *reach more participants* to work personally through their barriers in order to get, hold and sustain work.

Another great benefit is that the staff benefit from *learning* directly from a diverse group of learners and therefore *implement innovative processes* that contribute to *best practices* working with this population. And when participants are able to absorb information at their own pace, and return to the class with more confidence – the Facilitator has a more *engaging class*.

Lastly, staff have *less ZOOM fatigue* when on the computer for so many hours every day.

Organization

There are also benefits for ETHOS as an organization. We no longer lose women who cannot sit for hours at a computer (for reasons relating to everything from pain to exhaustion and bathroom issues), resulting in *higher outcomes* and *increased payments*. Furthermore, the funder provided *more resources* to allow for additional intakes. This allowed us to assist more participants and earn more money.

Word has gotten out about the program, both internally and externally. Internally other staff are looking to this program as a *leader*, and are interested in learning more about how they can use blended learning to make changes that will improve *their* program. Externally we had waitlists that were beyond the scope of what we are able to do. *Our reputation* has been established for employment programming that includes blended learning.

Community

The community also benefits when learners benefit. The community benefits from *integrating* members of the community who are eager to work and have received knowledge and supports, to be *successful employees*. More participants can become *involved* in and be a part of the community, creating independent learners. They can begin *volunteering* and/or *working* during the program for businesses in the community that are struggling to find workers. Local employers are given the *opportunity* to work with supported RiseUP! employees with disabilities, that statistics show are more *likely to stay* at their place of employment.

The community *connections* created by the program *improve attitudes* towards disabilities within communities and support a more *inclusive environment*. RiseUP! offers employers and non-profits with volunteer opportunities the ability to support the growth of their community during COVID-19 recovery.

STRUCTURES IN PLACE - INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN, LEARNER SUPPORTS, ASSESSMENT

Instructional Design

The RiseUP! Program has been *designed to support* participants to progress through learning outcomes at their own pace with the knowledge of expected outcomes. More complex topics are allocated to the synchronous morning sessions and less complex activities are allocated to the afternoon asynchronous components. RiseUP! is delivered within current *best practices* developed in the field of adult education.

The learning model has been *tailored to accommodate* diverse education levels and learning styles. A *balance* is struck between guided and independent learning with 1:1 supports to mitigate individual challenges with the material. Asynchronous webinars provide the learning opportunity and then the participants can get *more/deeper learning* with the Facilitator. The program design has *clear expected results* that provide goals for the staff and the learners.

The current model is necessarily *flexible* to allow for the *complex intersections* of the impacts of physical challenges, COVID-19 challenges, trauma, social isolation, and discrimination.

Learner Supports

Learner supports are numerous throughout the program. The individual EC provides a personalized connection which increases accountability and comfortability within the program. In fact, each participant has an Employment Counsellor and a Job Developer, who all support the participant in the course materials. They are also offered extra material if/when needed.

Learners supports consist of 1:1 time with the Facilitator, or small groups of 3-4:1 with the Facilitator for *extra time* to break down the information. Afternoons are open for participants to have *further help* with their classroom assignments, resumes/cover letters and any technological issues they need to overcome. The Facilitator makes themselves *available* to the participants, and the Employment Counsellor and Job Developer provide mentorship as well. Participants are able to *book appointments online*.

On the subjects that can be ambiguous or easily misunderstood, Facilitators are doing *live lectures*. For more basic, ground work information, *videos* by staff, YouTube videos, *articles* and related are provided.

If significant barriers are identified *additional resources* are sought. If educational assessments are required then participants are *supported to gain access*. This has contributed to participants *gaining knowledge* of their learning needs and employment accommodations, often for the first time. This *wholistic approach* supports the participant's *distinctive needs and considerations*.

Assessment

Program Assessment - This program is *catered* towards women with disabilities, and many of the assessment pieces have been *modified* and *adapted*. For example, all material that is required to be completed must be finished by the end of the course (resumes, cover letters, job search action plan, etc.). It is recommended to the participants that they follow the suggested weekly deadlines, but the RiseUP! team is very willing to accommodate.

Assessment of Blended Learning Model - We are able to assess the success of our blended learning model in a few different ways. First, on the technology side of the equation, we can look at the back end of the LMS to see if participants are finishing the modules and/or how far they might have gotten. We have exercises incorporated into the LMS to test their knowledge after an asynchronous session, giving us a good indication if the information delivered has been absorbed and understood by the participant.

We ask participants to complete a feedback form (evaluation) at the end of the RiseUP! Program. This helps us to determine if they found the model useful, about its strengths and weaknesses and where we

can make improvements. Staff meet weekly and discuss how the model is working. The Director has advised that they make minor adjustments based on participant feedback.

We can also assess the blended learning model by outcomes. Women not dropping out of the program is one indicator, as is program completion, and then getting a job, work experience, or going back to school. If the model was not useful, they would struggle with all of these outcomes. To-date we have been quite successful, meeting targets and outcomes.

TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY/TOOLS USED TO CREATE THE BLENDED ENVIRONMENT

Participants are supported to engage on the Zoom format. For some this is a new and critical skill, given the current context of the labour market and COVID-19. There is also an introduction to additional tools such as Flipgrid, Discord, and other components that can support the development of digital resumes and other employment advantages.

Participants are asked to add each new technology skill they gain through the program to their resume. Additionally, participants receive education on managing their online presence in relation to employability. Participants have access to a well-designed Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS has numerous design components to mitigate the conditions of disability.

All current tools:

- LMS (Learning Management Systems) – self paced work – (text book)
- Discord – to communicate with participants for updated information about webinars
- Flipgrid
- Canva/Word Press
- Jamboard
- Spark
- YouTube
- Zoom
- TikTok coming soon

ETHOS has a created Team of ‘Ambassadors’ who meet quarterly to review and assess new learning tools for use in all programs and services. This is a new initiative that has been very well received by staff.

A TYPICAL DAY, WEEK AND MONTH

The RiseUP! program involves 4 days of classes (Monday to Thursday) with 1 flexible day (Friday). In the morning from 10-12, participants attend a synchronous Zoom class. In the afternoon from 1-3pm, participants complete their tasks asynchronously. During the afternoon, participants are able to meet synchronously with their Facilitator. At the beginning of the program, each participant is assigned an Employment Coach; on Fridays, participants can use their time to meet with their Employment Counsellor, their course Facilitator, or get caught up on assignments.

Please also see **Appendix A - Week 1 Schedule**. This has been provided as an example.

HOW THE PROGRAM/COURSE PROVIDES PARTICIPANT CHOICE AND INDEPENDENCE

The program is designed to meet individual needs and independence is supported in the structure. Each participant is assessed in relation to the learning model. Some are able to work primarily in an asynchronous format, while others require more direct support. So, participants can choose to do synchronous or not; it is up to them. They can also work at their own pace, and/or do self-paced work which creates independence.

Participants can still get assignments done and in but with more flexibility to complete on their own schedule. They are able to choose if they want to do the assignment on their own, or at least attempt to do it on their own, knowing that staff are available to reach out to. Many of our participants have multiple barriers and/or disabilities and it is vital in the journey to employment that they experience 'wins' – having the opportunity to complete assignments when it is optimal for them – which could be late at night or very early in the morning when they are able to concentrate, or even just to do it on their own so they don't feel self-conscious in a group. These 'wins' move the participants closer to their goals of employment, self-employment or volunteer work.

The program provides the participants with many choices and it helps with disabilities like ADHD – when it is hard to focus for long periods of time. It gives people with "DiversAbilities" the chance to work at their own pace and meet their targets.

ANALYSIS, ASSESSMENT, EXPLORATION AND LEARNING

While I was instrumental in moving the LMS based program (resources, training information, supporting videos, infographics and related, housed on the LMS) from a synchronous delivery model (ZOOM) to a blended synchronous-asynchronous model this past summer, I was not involved in the actual changes. And until now, I had not had the opportunity to see what Janessa and the Team had done. I was also unaware of the benefits to all parties, as listed above.

I can most definitively say that the team did an incredible job on both the quality of the material and delivery and the execution of bringing it to life! I was not sure about staff buy-in, as up until recently we usually had staff push back with the use of technology and learning tools. The team not only embraced the changes but clearly helped our participants to do the same. Staff were also able to see the many benefits of moving to this model as it improved participant engagement and outcome numbers. And although I did not refer to it in this assignment, they also embraced *accessibly tools*, to the point where our Learning, Innovation and Technology Team provided a E-Learn (Lunch and Learn) at program staff request.

Our RiseUP! participants seemed to have also benefitted greatly from the move to this blended delivery model, to the point where we stopped losing them because the synchronous model was not working in their favour. As described below, we were able to increase intakes and participant numbers, based on a long waitlist, and also recently gave a demo to our funders. They were 'blown away'.

Another remarkable outcome from RiseUP! is that it has led to further programming and funding from another funder. ETHOS currently runs a program on the Island called Island Ops, funded by Service Canada through the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities. This funder offered us just over

\$500,000 to create an Employer Hub to help employers understand how to hire and work with Persons with Disabilities. The project is to design an interactive web-based Community Learning Hub where Vancouver Island Employers can access support in the following key areas for working with Persons with Disabilities: communication and language, HR and creating an inclusive workplace, training/funding and legal rights and workplace accommodations.

Note: In my request for information for this assignment, staff were more than willing to share their thoughts, and I did not receive a single negative comment.
(This is unusual as we have professional staff are not afraid to share their opinions).

REFERENCE

Bates, T. (2021, January). *Online learning and (k-12) schools: 2. Technology and cost issues*. Retrieved from Online Learning and Distance Education Resources website:
<https://www.tonybates.ca/2021/01/10/online-learning-and-k-12-schools-2-technology-and-cost-issues>