

Independent Evaluation of the Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia's Welcome Ambassador Training

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This evaluation is of the Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia's (ISANS) Welcome Ambassador training program. ISANS is largest settlement service organization in Atlantic Canada with a mandate to facilitate the settlement and integration of newcomers to Halifax and Nova Scotia. The Welcome Ambassador training program was designed to train community leaders to respond to the rapid increase of Syrian refugees to Halifax and to promote a welcoming community. The evaluation was conducted voluntarily and independently by five university based researchers. Funds to support the evaluation were provided by Saint Mary's University.

Executive Summary

- Overall, participants offered an extremely positive assessment of the Welcome Ambassador Training.
- Participants appreciated the wide range of materials used to convey information and promote learning in the program.
- Much value was place in the course as an opportunity to engage in experiential learning.
- Success of the program was a result of the non-authoritative approach to facilitation.
- Integration of first person voices added to the experience of the program and were described as “transformative.”
- The information and material of workshop were highly appreciated, but some participants felt that it was too general and could be further calibrated
- The modules of the workshop were well received and used. This was especially the case for the building community and cultural humility modules.
- The training was especially helpful for people new to settlement services and those located outside of Halifax Regional Municipality
- All participants used at least some element of the training in their work and engagement with newcomers

Evaluation Objectives and Methodology

This evaluation of the ISANS Welcome Ambassador Training program has four goals:

1. Understand the program's objectives and determine whether or not they were met.
2. Offer an assessment on the successes and failures of the structure of the program from the vantage point of participants.
3. Offer an assessment on the successes and failures of the program's modules from the vantage point of participants.
4. Provide recommendations on how the program could be adjusted if offered in future iterations.

In order to achieve these objectives the evaluation team conducted an online survey, interviews, and participant observation of the program's debriefing sessions and program sessions.

Of the 24 participants in the program, 22 participated in the online survey and 12 were interviewed. Surveys were designed to understand the extent to which the Welcome Ambassador training program altered participants' opinions of newcomers. It focused on the information provided, program delivery and training modules.

Interviews were conducted, by phone, between June and August 2016, and ranged from thirty to sixty minutes. Interview questions were designed to understand motivations for taking the program, expectations, objectives, and overall experience. Participants were asked to reflect on the program's organization, its content, and its structure.

The project's research assistant also met with and interviewed the program's facilitator. This was done to gain a better sense of the program's objective and methodology, as well as its projected use in the future. The project's principal investigator attended two of four debriefing sessions at the end of the training. He also participated in two of four training sessions in a subsequent iteration of the program.

An overview of ISANS' Welcome Ambassador Training program and objectives

The Welcome Ambassador training program was developed and delivered by the ISANS to prepare Nova Scotians to welcome refugees and newcomers. This occurred in response to the Canadian government's decision to resettle 25, 000 refugees between November 2015 and March 2016. Approximately 900 of these refugees were resettled in Nova Scotia.

The Welcome Ambassador program sought to provide participants with the tools necessary to create inclusive, equitable, and welcoming communities. It also aimed to enable them to effectively serve as community organizers within their own milieus. The program offered substantive learning to garner an understanding of refugee related issues. Modules offered opportunities for active self-reflective learning by encouraging participants to work through unrecognized bias and privilege to develop effective ways of communicating cross-culturally.

The program aimed to equip participants with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to develop and implement their own Welcome Ambassador workshops within their social, professional, and volunteer networks. The program also aimed to encourage participants to think creatively about where they could have influence and to give participants information they could use to counter negative sentiment and opinion concerning refugees when they encountered it.

The Welcome Ambassador Training program was organized into four, three and a half hour sessions which were held between 3:30 and 6:30PM every second Tuesday over the course of eight weeks. The schedule was deliberate. The organizers wanted to provide participants enough time between sessions to reflect on and work through the content of each session. At the same time, the organizers aimed to establish supportive networks of individuals engaged in welcoming newcomers.

Each of the four sessions or modules were organized around a central theme. These were 1) Community Building; 2) Cultural Humility; 3) Power and Privilege; 4) Communication, Conflict, and Action Plans.

2. Evaluation of program delivery

Overall, participants offered an extremely positive assessment of the Welcome Ambassador Training. This section offers an in-depth summary of participants' feedback on the program. It looks at motivations for taking the training, content delivery, the facilitator, guest speakers, interactions among participants, and information and material provided.

Participant Motivation

Participants noted that they expected that the program would provide new skills that they could directly use in their work with newcomers. They also mentioned that they would use it to train members of their professional, volunteer, and social networks on building welcoming and inclusive communities.

All of the participants cited the growing number of Syrian families in their communities and/or accessing their services as a reason to take the program. As one participant explained:

“When the government decided to open the borders and to allow more [Syrian] refugees to come—more newcomers, I thought it would be a great way to be, just to be an ambassador for them, [and] to show other Canadians in our communities [how] to understand, and to debunk some of the myths that we hear.”

Participants hoped that the program would facilitate their work with refugee newcomers, providing them with the opportunity to learn more about the Syrian community. Many hoped to work through their unacknowledged biases, and to develop the skills required of effective cross-cultural communication.

“Experiences like [the Welcome Ambassador Training program] really take you further or they help you to remember. They reinforce how important it is to always be examining your own biases and your organizational biases.”

At the same time, participants—particularly those working in diverse communities, hoped the training would enable them to bring people together. There was interest in using the training to not only work with newcomers, but to develop programs that would bridge the divide between

existing community members as a whole. Participants expressed interest in using the training as an opportunity to meet other people engaged in similar work.

While all participants intended to disseminate the materials provided by ISANS in and through their work with Syrian refugees, only a subsection –mostly those working in service delivery– planned to do so formally by training colleagues, employees, or volunteers within their agencies or organizations. A number of service providers entered the program with the intention of becoming “Welcome Ambassador” facilitators.

Participants who worked in sectors not directly related to the delivery of services to newcomers, many of whom had little to no experience as facilitators and in some instances limited exposure to newcomers, were more likely to anticipate an informal application of their learning.

Assessment of Content Delivery

The program’s structure was based on a model of adult education that brings together action, reflection, and evaluation. Participants were provided with information delivered on Power Point in training sessions and were given supporting materials. At the beginning of sessions participants set objectives and were then guided through exercises and encouraged to evaluate their effectiveness and to reflect on their personal experiences of them. Participants engaged in large group discussion, small group work, and would often break into pairs to talk one-on-one. This was supplemented by first person voices, delivered through video in some instances and by guest speakers in others. In some weeks participants were also given homework with materials in the course binder.

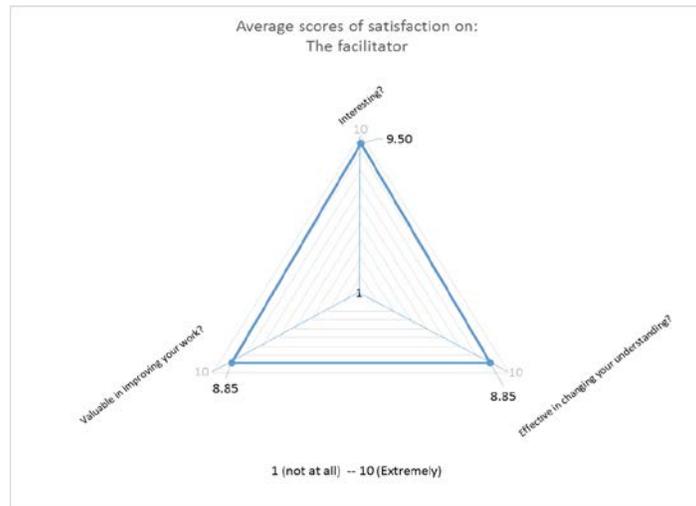
In general participants appreciated the wide range of materials used to convey information and promote learning in the program. One participant noted:

“What I really liked was the variety of learning experiences. There was lots of time for discussion amongst participants, which I think is so great because the people there were from so many different backgrounds. There was a good mix of that, of material, first voice speakers, small group work or pairs...It was designed so well that it really touched on all the different ways people can learn. And so it gave the opportunity to get the information and to apply it, but in multiple ways.”

While a few participants focused specifically on the information provided, the majority of participants stressed the value of the course as an opportunity to engage in experiential learning. Here, the information provided in the training was considered secondary to the manner in which it was imparted and reinforced. One participant explained that the value of the program was its capacity to “shift the gears” of thinking through active participation. She said she found herself deploying the skills that she had learned without being fully aware of it. In other words, the learning became embodied; it became an intrinsic way interacting not only with newcomers, but with colleagues, volunteers, co-members of sponsoring groups.

Facilitator

Participants commented that this mode of highly engaged, reflective, and interactive engagement was reinforced by the more substantive learning in the classroom. They felt that the success of the program was very much an outcome of the facilitator’s approach which was non-authoritarian, and promoted conversation without dictating the content or direction of the training. They agreed that the program’s facilitation, and overall delivery of the program was highly effective and responsive to a wide range of learning styles. In general the facilitator was seen as a core strength of the program.



Guest speakers

Guest speakers were invited throughout the workshop, and they spoke to a variety of newcomer experiences. In hearing these narratives, organizers anticipated that participants would develop a clearer understandings of the realities faced by new Nova Scotians, and would be able to empathize more authentically. Survey respondents all rated the guest speakers as very to extremely interesting, with the vast majority of participants, expressing that they were “extremely interesting” and “extremely effective.”

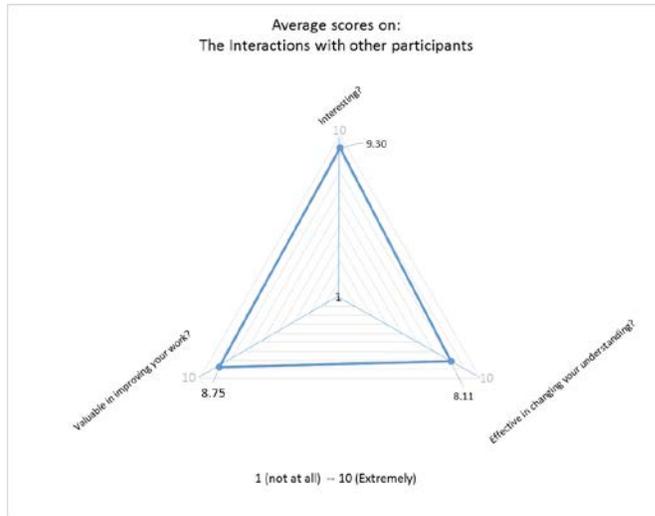
Participants felt that the integration of first person voices added to the experience of the program. One participant even described the experience as transformative. Others said it was vital for the creation of empathy and understanding.

While the guest speakers were well received and highly rated, one participant pointed out in her follow-up interview that more time was needed to talk through the feelings generated by those encounters. She went on to say there needed to be more structure and clarity around the guest speakers and the relationship between their narratives and the objectives of sessions. She felt this could be accomplished by increasing the time allotted to debriefing and by following-up with an exercise that reinforced the learning offered by the guest speaker.

Interactions among Participants

While guest speakers offered first person voices, of equal significance was the extent to which participants were encouraged to share their own personal stories, experiences, and reflections, and act as sounding boards for their co-participants. This was a critical component of program’s design, and it very much followed from the pedagogical approach employed by the facilitator.

Appreciation of interactions with other participants is seen in the survey results, with most participants rating them as extremely interesting, valuable, and effective.



Both participants and the facilitator felt that interactions among participants was central to the success of the workshop. This was, in large part, an outcome of the diversity of the group itself. In the open response section of the survey dealing with other participants, a number of people noted that the range of people present, the breadth of their experiences, and their willingness to share opening greatly contributed to their learning. This was also reflected in the follow-up interviews. As one participant explained:

“It worked because of the diversity of the people there...there was just a great mix. And the way it was set up allowed opportunity to speak to everyone. There wasn’t one person in the group that I didn’t have a chance to connect with one-on-one.”

Another participant commented that her observations of the group dynamic and the facilitator’s mediation of participant interaction was of use for her own development as a facilitator. She noted that:

“For me, where I was looking more from a ‘train the trainer’ perspective, it was a really important experience for me indirectly, so to observe how other people experience those things, and how much time it took.”

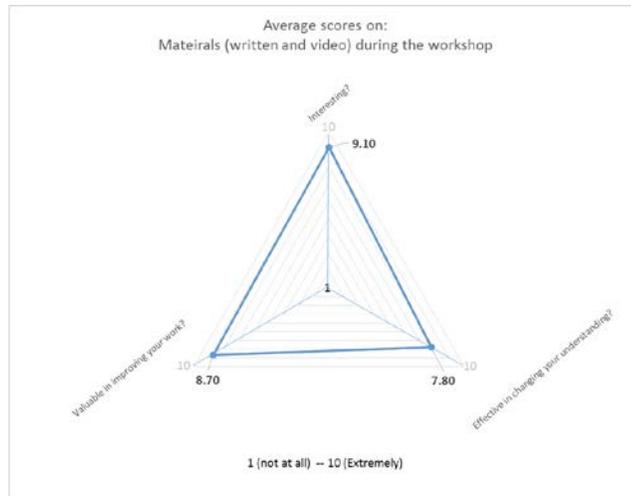
Her comment further reflects the multiple forms of learning that took place during the workshop. By engaging in the workshop as participants, as opposed to “simply” future facilitators, they were able to observe each other and the facilitator, while consistently gauging and reflecting on their own experiences of the program.

Information and Materials Provided

The information provided in the workshop focused primarily on Syrian refugees, offering insight into the root causes of the conflict in Syria, the reasons for flight, the experience of displacement, and that of resettlement in Nova Scotia. The program also provided information about immigration to Canada and Nova Scotia, as well as information about settlement challenges and barriers to integration more broadly.

Although this content was rated highly in the survey results, the satisfaction with this element of the workshop was lower than other components. This can be seen in the lower average rating, for instance of the efficacy of the materials.

These sentiments are due to many participants already having considerable experience with newcomers, and so the program may have deepened their understanding, but did not change it. Additionally, some participants saw the material as simply a means to the more experiential lessons of the workshop.



That said, while for some the information was secondary to the more experiential aspects of the workshop, for others it was central. One such participant stated:

“It provided me with lots of new information; it gave me some statistics. It gave me a broader world view of where people were coming from— what types of things they were dealing with in coming here... Those types of things really helped me to understand, and to have a deeper compassion.”

2. Evaluation of the Program Modules of the ISANS Welcome Ambassador Training program

The Welcome Ambassador training consisted of four program modules. In this section we evaluate each in the sequence that participants engaged them through the duration of the training.

Community Building & Understanding the Refugee Experience

The goal of the first module was to offer a baseline of information on newcomer settlement in Nova Scotia, with an emphasis on Syrian refugees. It also aimed to create a community of Welcome Ambassadors amongst participants.

The first module on community building and understanding the refugee experience was regarded as extremely informative and all but three participants answering the question used elements of the session in their work or engagement with newcomers following the training.

The session was opened with a “diversity welcome”, the purpose of which was to foster inclusion through the naming of different aspects of people’s identities. A number of participants reflected positively on the welcome, commenting that it helped set the tone for the training program. One participant explained, “I really liked the diversity welcome because it really got to the core of it right at the beginning.” Another described her experience using the welcome in the workshop she conducted: “I included the diversity welcome. But I could hardly get through it without crying because it’s so powerful, and it really had that effect on the people at the workshop.” Participants felt that the diversity welcome signaled the intention of the facilitator to create a community of Welcome Ambassadors amongst participants—an objective largely realized, if only for the duration of the course.



A number of participants identified networking with other individuals involved in settlement as a key objective of their participation. For participants new to settlement service through private sponsorship efforts this was even more the case, particularly when participants lived and worked outside of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). These participants spoke of having very few local supports, and as reflected in the quote above, very few people who understood the experience of private sponsorship. In terms of the longevity of this community, or the maintenance of the connections established during the workshop, it is unclear. A few participants spoke of planning to collaborate in the future with several of their co-participants, but these were service providers located in the HRM. Following the completion of the program, few—it would seem—of those located outside of the HRM remained in contact. Rurally based participants suggested a follow-up session as a way of checking-in and reconnecting.

Cultural Humility and Understanding New Nova Scotians

The second module encouraged a critical and nuanced understanding of culture, and the complexities of newcomer settlement in Nova Scotia. It also encouraged on-going self-reflection in the service of cultural humility.

The majority of participants identified this module as pivotal for their overall learning in the workshop. With rare exception, the participants emphasized the usefulness of “cultural humility” as a concept and as practice. All but three participants drew upon the concept cultural humility in their work since completing workshop.

In the detailed feedback on the survey, one participant expressed that cultural humility:

“Was like the missing piece of a puzzle. It has helped me better articulate my position about ethnocentricity in a kinder, more inside-out way.”



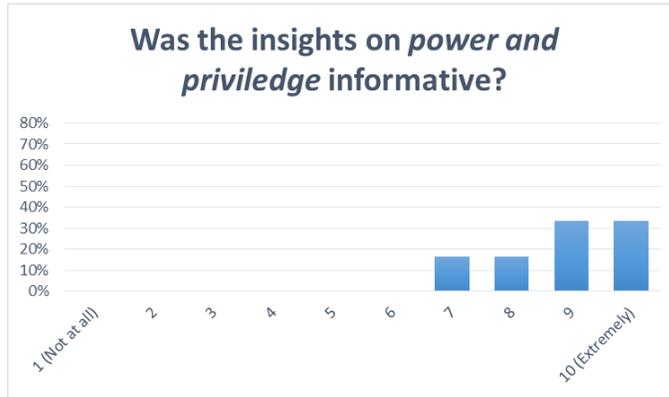
One of the participants who found it less useful cited a pre-existing knowledge of the term and its conditions. She explained that while she suspected her co-participants found it useful, she had hoped to go into in more depth. In her interview, this participant brought into focus the varying degrees of experience amongst the group, and stressed that she would have preferred a higher level examination of some of the concepts and theories drawn on through the program.

Others in group, however, many of them well versed in newcomer settlement, inclusivity, and cultural competency, were nonetheless enthusiastic about the concept and saw it as a way of deepening their understanding and appreciation of cultural difference.

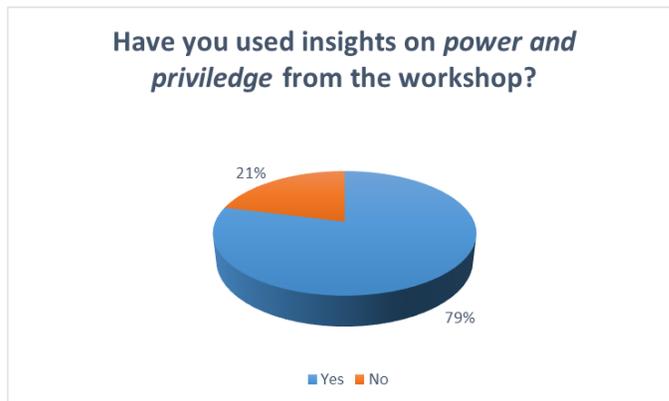
Power and Privilege

The third module encouraged an in-depth understanding of social location, power, and privilege. The goal was to ensure that service providers and those involved in private sponsorship are able to serve as allies to new Nova Scotians.

Although participants were generally positive about this module, fewer were extremely enthusiastic than the previous two modules. All but four participants drew upon the concept learnings on power and privilege in their work since completing workshop.



All participants interviewed commented on their increased capacity to work with new Nova Scotians and serve as allies. Running as a thread through almost all of the interviews was a clear sense of the need to empower newcomers. To participants this meant hearing the needs of newcomers as they, themselves, articulated them, and responding to them, in contrast to assuming to know what they needed.



Complementing the previous session on cultural humility, this session’s objective was to encourage participants to situate themselves and their experiences within various kinds of social hierarchy. This was reinforced through an exercise called the “More Than/Less Than Activity”, which asked participants to identify different instances where they are perceived either as “more than” or “less than”, and to consider the ways in which “more than” identifies often go unnoticed by their bearers.

While a number of participants commented on the difficulty of this exercise, stating that it was somewhat cumbersome relative to the others, one participant—a woman of colour, observed that its lessons were less applicable to individuals subjected to racialization and racism. She also felt that direct engagement with racism and its effects on newcomers was missing from this module and, more broadly, the program.

Communication, Conflict and being an Ambassador

The last module provided individuals working with new Nova Scotians the skills to communicate effectively cross-culturally. It also provided participants with the skills, material, and confidence to disseminate their new learning within their networks. Its goals was to move participants to think creatively about where and how they might be able to enact social change in their communities.

Much like the other modules, the final session was highly rated by participants . Like the third module, however, people were less enthusiastic than the first sessions. All but five participants drew upon the concept learnings on power and privilege in their work since completing workshop.

Communication and language, more broadly was discussed by participants in the follow-up interviews in three principle ways. First, participants referred to their growing awareness of the way language can stigmatize newcomers. As one participant explained that the program: “...provided me with some new language...do we continue to call people refugees or are they new Nova Scotians?’ It was very interesting to learn about how “new Nova Scotians” is actually much more appropriate.” Here, participants were encouraged to abandon stigmatizing, exclusionary language for a more inclusive term.



Second, participants spoke of the ways that language can be used to exclude newcomers whose English may be limited, and they were encouraged to consider adapting language in order to be more inclusive. This meant using plain language, speaking slowly, and avoiding complicated sentence structure. These skills were modeled and then practiced through a variety of exercises.

Participants also spoke of developing a new vocabulary that framed their experience of becoming Welcome Ambassadors. A number of participants, well-seasoned in settlement, cultural competency, diversity, and inclusivity, spoke of adding to their professional and social justice “tool kits”. One participant, however, stated that she struggled with this new vocabulary, suggesting that it was better suited for the service providers present who would be able to use it as short-hand amongst their colleagues. In contrast, she felt that the language of power, privilege, and cultural competency was less likely to resonate with, for example, members of sponsoring groups.

All participants identified an increase in their ability to communicate effectively with newcomers. They also expressed a considerable increase in their ability to challenge derogatory and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours targeting new Nova Scotians and Syrian refugees in particular. Across participants, this was attributed to the new information and knowledge they gained about the Syrian refugee crises and the challenges of settlement, and the insights they garnered from the method of facilitation deployed by the facilitator.

Assessment of modules

Following the completion of the four sessions, all of the participants used their training. This is critical, not only because participants had committed to conducting at least two Welcome

Ambassador workshops, but because, as the facilitator explained that the program was designed to encourage agency and action among the participants.

Participants came to see themselves not as passive and isolated learners, but as agents of social change. At the same time, this was one areas the garnered the most criticism.

While the response was overwhelmingly positive, and all participants felt better equipped to welcome newcomers and support diversity, many expressed that the program's stated objective of "train the trainer" was less effectively realized. This was particularly noted by those who had not done any workshop facilitation in the past. They express a need for more concrete direction concerning the practicalities of organizing and delivering a workshop. Although the forth session was partially intended to meet this need, participants noted feeling rushed and not having an adequate sense of how to proceed.

All of the participants interviewed, described adapting the training to a suit a variety of purposes, in a variety of contexts. While some deployed their learning informally—using it to “cultivate empathy” through daily interaction and conversation, others developed modified Welcome Ambassador Training programs. Participants used material from the training to inform colleagues, employees, volunteers, and service users across a variety of municipal and governmental sites. Other participants delivered the training to co-members of their refugees sponsoring groups. Often this was done with core members, but in several instances it was delivered to groups of volunteers—individuals who would be assisting with, but not central to, the resettlement process. Further, a number of participants were also able to tap into opportunities within their extended professional and volunteer networks. In this way, they moved beyond their immediate places of work and sites of engagement with refugee newcomers, thereby broadening the reach of the training.

Overall assessment

1. The program accomplished more than the original objectives.
2. Facilitation and hands-on exercises were important for the success of the workshop.
3. The program created leadership for a more open and tolerant community.

Recommendations

1. The program should be repeated and made available to more community leaders.
2. The program can be expanded to look at more diverse groups of refugees and newcomers.
3. Adjust the amount and focus of information to tailor for diverse audiences.
4. Opportunities to follow-up and share information among alumni of the program should be pursued.
5. ISANS should be encouraged to develop the program nationally and for other cities and towns.