Oral Interactions in Learning Contexts

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Relational skills are increasingly considered essential in professional environments and, more generally, in the overall development of individuals. Whether it is in the context of occupations focused on helping relationships (nurse, social work or special education technician, teacher, psychologist, etc.) or on business relationships and customer service (entrepreneur, technician in various fields, etc.), or even in occupations that simply involve collaboration in an organization, relational skills are, beyond knowledge and know-how, at the heart of the competent action that individuals must be able to mobilize. Thus, we can understand the concern of an internship supervisor who observes a student's tendency to interact informally in a context requiring professional distance; or the discomfort of a politics teacher who, in a debate, sees one of their students continually interrupting the other participants; or the discouragement of a nursing teacher who observes, during an intervention simulation, a student's lack of interest in the fears expressed by the person role-playing the patient. If relational skills are at the heart of competent action, it seems reasonable to believe that they should be taught and evaluated in a college teaching context... but how?

This article¹ addresses the issue of teaching and assessing relational skills through oral interaction. It offers a summary of reflections accompanied by elements of analysis, tools and resources likely to help teachers who wish to support the development of their students' relational skills.

¹ This text was developed following co-trainings organized by LabSEL. See the final text box for a more detailed explanation of LabSEL and the principle of its co-trainings. The references that helped to develop these co-trainings are also made available there.

Considering oral communication as a speech act

The concept of oral proficiency is well known in educational settings. However, it is often associated with one-way communication—such as oral presentations. Although it is possible to provide some guidelines in this context (tone, posture, voice projection, articulation, rhythm), it can be observed that some students are simply more gifted than others, as if they have a "sense of showmanship" that allows them to win over their audience quite naturally, through their non-verbal language and their ability to adapt to the listener (Cormier and Langlois, 2020). As these little "extras" that make for good speakers are sometimes so intangible, so difficult to identify, they give rise to the impression that oral interaction skills are more innate than skills that can be acquired through training. Moreover, oral competence is often linked to seemingly immutable personality traits, such as shyness and talkativeness, which reinforces the idea that it is difficult to train individuals in speaking skills. Many of them will be able to go about their lives and work without having to speak formally in front of a large group in the manner of traditional oral presentations. Thus, many teachers resign themselves to doing their best to teach some basics while accepting that there is a certain limit to the development of this competency.

However, when we look at oral competence outside the school context, either in everyday life or in an authentic work context, we quickly come to recognize that it is sconstantly mobilized, not as formal speaking, but rather as relational speaking. Hence it becomes relevant to consider oral communication as a contextualized speech act.2 Speech acts are part of everyone's daily life. They take a multitude of forms: to introduce oneself, to thank, to greet, to express one's satisfaction or dissatisfaction, to express one's disagreement, to rectify a statement, to give an order, to warn, to interrupt and to check one's understanding with an interlocutor (Dumais, 2017, p. 14). These are just a few examples of the many contexts in which speech allows people to interact and "be" in the world. All oral competence is rooted in the ability to regulate and implement these speech acts: being competent in oral communication means [...] knowing how to ask a question, how to make appropriate contact with a teacher or a colleague, how to present the results of an assignment to a group of peers, how to participate in a debate. how to conduct an interview, how to justify one's remarks, how to explain a line of reasoning (Dumais, 2017, p. 13). We can see that there is more to this than the ability to deliver an oral presentation in an educational context and more than a pleasant prosody³ and a beguiling voice... but, further to that realization, how do we develop the competency to interact orally?

Oral activities: spontaneity and interaction

Speech acts should be considered along two axes: their degree of spontaneity and their degree of interaction.

The **degree of spontaneity** of a speech act implies concordant expectations

as to the quality of its content and form. People do not have the same requirements regarding a scientific conference talk as regarding an answer given following an impromptu student question in the context of a pedagogi-cal discussion (and about which the teacher is not immediately certain). The higher the degree of preparation of the oral communication situation, the higher the expected quality in terms of the content of what is said. The more spontaneous the situation, the more this quality will be based on the individual's ability to speak adequately in keeping with the communicative situation (objectives, norms, context, stakes, etc.). A scientific talk must be rich in accurate and relevant informa-tion: a teacher's response, since the aim of the discussion is pedagogical, must offer learning opportunities, in particular through requests for clarifi-cation, formulation of hypotheses, and clarification of the reasoning that leads them to propose answer elements—or the shortcomings that prevent them from doing so. The same teacher, faced with an impromptu situation

² Toute forme d'expression verbale mise en œuvre par un individu dans son interaction avec l'environnement.

³ Intonation montante ou descendante, débit, pause, accentuation, rythme, etc.

that compromises their classroom management, will have to analyze their potential reactions in light of the dynamics of the group, their relationship with it, their knowledge of their own strengths and limitations as well as the contextual constraints (time, history with this group, etc.), in order to react in the most appropriate manner possible: taking an authoritative approach, bringing a touch of humour, continuing the course in a calm manner to get back to the subject, etc. In other words, it makes sense to expect from a pre-pared speech act a quality of content, whereas the quality of oral commu-nication in a spontaneous context depends rather on an individual's ability to apprehend a communicative situation (objectives, norms, context, stakes, possibilities, constraints, etc.) and to act with judgment.

The second axis to consider is the degree of interaction involved in the communicative situation. In absolute terms, almost all communicative situations involve some form of interaction. For example, good public speakers are sensitive to non-verbal interactions between themselves and their audience and will adapt in light of them. However, the fact remains that some communicative situations are bidirectional to a smaller or greater extent depending on whether or not they involve interaction. A lecture given by an expert, for example, involves fewer exchanges than a discussion between a special education technician and the individual with whom they intervene. A certain performance is expected from the lecturer: an adequate rhythm and modulation of the voice, captivating gestures and intonation... In the second case, the success

of the communicative situation will depend on the quality of the techni-cian's listening and interaction skills.

These two axes are represented in Figure 1. It could be argued that interaction often involves a certain amount of spontaneity; nevertheless, there are communicative situations where one can have expectations about the depth of what is said even though they involve interaction. This is the case for debates or round tables for which students have had the opportunity to prepare, or even for an interview simulation with a student as part of a course comprehensive evaluation. This is also the case for many profes-sional situations, since even if every new situation has its particularities, a competent person will master to a certain extent a panoply of knowledge on typical everyday situations



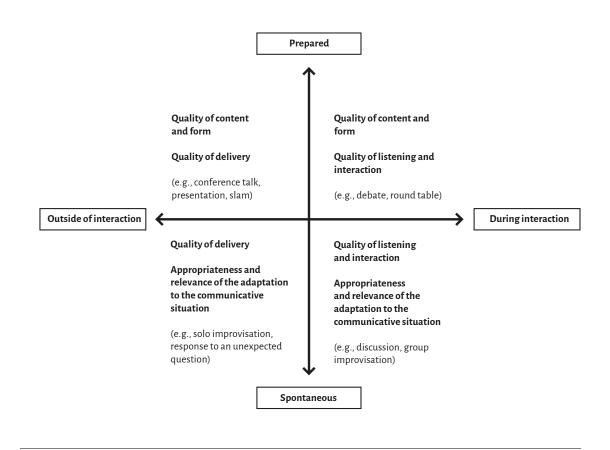
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that arise in their profession. There are, however, spontaneous situations that may involve little interaction—for example, when someone asks us to elaborate on an issue in the context of an informal discussion. Obviously, everything depends on how we segment the

communicative situation in time. Like any theoretical framework, the one we propose should be seen more as a tool for understanding a complex reality than as an absolute exposition of a reality that can be compartmentalized.

Figure 1

Quality criteria sought according to oral communication type



From a pedagogical perspective, the teacher gains from considering the various quality criteria that can be expected depending on the nature of an oral communication situation.

This is the starting point for thinking about the elements that would be relevant to teach to students in order to improve their grasp of these communicative situations. **Table 1**

provides an overview of the relevant elements related to each of the quality criteria outlined.

Consistent expectations for oral situations and relevant elements to be taught in a learning context

Types of situations	Consistent expectations	Relevant elements
Prepared	Relevant, accurate and rich content and form. The speaker masters the concepts and ideas and, in some cases, the specific form of discourse and the expected supporting media.	 Excellent command of the content presented and/or experience related to it. Depending on the situation, ability to integrate qualities specific to the expected discourse (aesthetic, argumentative, etc.) (e.g.: slam, debate) Depending on the situation, understanding of the limitations of spoken discourse and appropriate
		use of other media to compensate for these limitations (e.g.: presentation supported by a visual aid)
Spontaneous	Appropriateness and relevance of the adaptation to the communicative situation. The content or form of the speaker's discourse is consistent with the objectives and issues of the communicative situation. The speaker is able, at a later stage, to justify the choice of content or form of their discourse by explaining their logic of action in this context.	Knowledge of the parameters structuring a communicative situation: objectives of the situation and of the actors (not always the same), norms, stakes, relational dynamics, possibilities and constraints of the situation, personal strengths and limits of the actors in the situation, etc.
Outside of interaction	Quality of the delivery. The speaker masters the means of oral expression by exploiting its particular strengths and manages to highlight both their speech (articulation, voice modulation, clarity, gestures supporting the understanding of the message) and their person	Understanding of the strengths and limitations of spoken discourse: speech that does not leave trace and, therefore, involves anchoring in its context and reality to support listeners' simultaneous understanding of the utterance (e.g., details or abstractions are often not rendered as well orally as concrete examples or vivid narratives)
	(non-verbal language communicating an impression of control of the situation and interaction with the audience).	 Mastery of the "physical" tools of oral communication (voice modulation, articulation, adapted gestures)
		 Understanding of the skills needed to give the audience an impression of control and interaction choice of language level adapted to the target audience, gaze, occupation of space, etc.
During interaction	Quality of listening and interaction. While listening, the speaker shows signs of availability to the communicative situation and to the interlocutor. The observable acts of interaction indicate a consideration of what the other speakers are saying, but also a consideration for the relational issues involved in the communicative situation.	Explicit knowledge of interaction acts and reflection on the contexts in which they are relevant
		Understanding of interaction norms (register, number, form and content of interaction acts) according to the type of relationship (e.g., friendly professional), power dynamics (e.g., equality or authority relationship) and the context of the interaction (e.g., collaboration, support)

SPRING 2022 | VOL. 35, N° 3 49 The elements in this table not only provide tools for reflection that can facilitate the clarification of expectations and their evaluation, but also suggestions on what to consider teaching to students and what might be relevant for them to reflect on.

How the medium shapes language

It may be appropriate to contrast the specifics of spoken language with those of written language. For Dumais and Ostiguy (2019), the medium of oral language modifies certain characteristics of language that must be taken into account when assessing oral communication, especially in situations of spontaneous communication or those involving interactions.

Table 2

Distinctive differences in oral and written language

Distinctive elements	Spontaneous or interactive oral communication	Written communication
Elements of discourse	Utterance	Sentence
Autocorrection	Live: discourse is constructed, modified and adjusted as it unfolds.	Before reading
Discursive fluidity	Pauses and hesitations mark the simultaneous construction of thought and speech (disfluency).	No disfluency
Inferences	Inferences can be recognized by a certain ability to identify the links and parameters of the situation in the context of spoken discourse (observation and listening skills).	Inferences can be identified by a certain mastery of the syntax and structure of the text.
Logical relations	Utterances are juxtaposed without the links being made explicit (parataxis).	Relationship markers are explicit.
Distribution of meaning/ message	The message is conveyed by speech, context, body language and prosody.	The message is concentrated in the text.

Thus, when a student in Early Childhood Education is asked to comment orally on a case presented by their teacher and to explain how they understand the issues of this situation and how they would act in it, they are expected to construct their ideas as they verbalize them and this is noticeable in pauses, reformulations, and even corrections.

Similarly, in the context of a debate organized in a philosophy course, it is normal for students to mark the logical relationships between their arguments by sequencing, intonation and gestures that will allow their reasoning to be followed. However, the teacher should not be surprised if, in the context of the essay that follows, the written argumentation does not do justice to the quality of the debates that took place because of the awkward use of explicit relational markers, or their absence, as spoken language only exploits these to a small extent.

These differences should lead teachers to put the potential of certain pedagogical activities into perspective and to take into account the limitations of each medium. For example, attempting to prepare learners for the analysis of a written case study through an authentic learning activity in which each learner is required to interact orally with a patient will not allow them to practise the inferring skills necessary for the subsequent written assessment. Indeed, oral and written situations don't mobilize the same skills.

Enriching oral proficiency

How do we, as teachers, support students in developing their oral skills?

Conceptual tools: speaking as a textual genre

The notion of textual or oral genre allows us to understand the different elements that structure a communicative situation. Chartrand, Émery-Bruneau and Sénéchal (2015) present the elements to be considered in order to adequately analyze the communicative context and identify the elements relevant to it,4 both in oral and written form. Here is an overview of these characteristics that are likely to be relevant in a speaking situation:

- Communicative context: the intention or purpose of the communication, the social context of production and reception, the iden-tity of the speaker and the addressee, the world represented (concrete or abstract, real or fictitious), the themes treated;
- Discursive, semantic and grammatical characteristics: the structure and nature of the discourse (descriptive, explanatory, argumentative, narrative, etc.), its marks of subjectivity, the type of vocabulary and verb tenses, etc.;
- **Graphic or visual characteristics:** visual support, setting, etc.;
- **Oral characteristics:** speech rate, volume and tone of voice, nonverbal language, audio support, etc

These theoretical elements will be of relative value depending on the context. For example, it may be very important in some study programs to familiarize students with the characteristics of possible spontaneous communication contexts typical of their future profession, since this will provide them with tools that will enable them to quickly identify the parameters of these situations when they arise and to adapt to them. On the other hand, the clarification of discursive, semantic or grammatical characteristics will be very useful for beginner students who are unaware of the norms to be respected in a given communicative situation or who are yet to develop mastery of the language.5

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See on this subject Lanctôt, S. 'Aider les étudiants à mieux lire et écrire dans notre discipline en s'appropriant le concept de genre textuel', Pédagogie collégiale, vol. 33, no. 3, Spring 2020, p. 24-30.

⁵ Readers interested in an example of the application of textual genres in the context of oral interaction can consult Lucie Libersan's presentation entitled: Améliorer ses capacités d'expression orale en s'impliquant dans la communauté [labsel.cgodin.qcca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Libersan_Acfas.pptx].

Pedagogical tools: learning activities involving oral interaction

Some activities focus learning on oral expression in interactive contexts.

The **debate** is a public speaking practice in which participants attempt to convince an active audience (Lafontaine, 2004, p. 68). Its objective may be to reach a consensus or the manifestation of an irreducible disagreement between opponents. Generally, it precedes and prepares for a decision to be made (*ibid.*). While the debate can be used to work on argumentation, it can also be used with the aim of understanding other perspectives, eras, 6 problematic issues, etc.

The **round table** is a meeting characterized by the principle of equality between participants convened to discuss a specific topic (Legendre, 1993, n.p.). It involves a prepared or unprepared group discussion without an audience; the form of the exchanges (argumentative, descriptive, etc.) is not defined and calls for a heterogeneity of discourse.

The **seminar** is defined as a meeting of a small group of (prepared) students who collectively explore a given topic under the guidance of a teacher who acts as an expert and facilitator (Tournier, 1978, n.p.). The discussion takes place without an audience and equality is not absolute because of the teacher's presence.

Finally, the **panel** is made up of individuals considered representative of a situation or a set of fields of expertise relevant to a given subject; the panelists have expert status, whether

because of their knowledge, their skills or their experience. Panelists are presented with a topic for discussion prior to the meeting and are asked to present and justify their views to an audience. Since the discussion process occurs essentially between the panelists, the audience is faced with a presentation and can only intervene at specific times (question period) and in one way (asking a question to the panel⁷). The panel aims to inform, but also seeks—through the unpredictable nature of the exchanges, the high level of expertise of the panelists and the diversity they represent—a certain form of intellectual stimulation.

Teaching tools: techniques and methods

What teaching activities can be implemented in the classroom to support students in developing their speaking skills? Some examples:

- Highlight dimensions to be prioritized according to the targeted framework (see Figure 1 and Table 1);
- Determine the characteristics of the oral genre in question by drawing on the textual genre model (see section on "Conceptual tools: speaking as a textual genre");
- Provide a model based on a recording of spoken delivery;
- Listen to several examples of the same oral genre to help students identify its specific characteristics;
- Have students practise and assess their speaking skills (selfassessment, peer assessment);

 Have them take notes using an observation grid based on the characteristics of the oral genre or indicators of interaction acts while listening to a recording.

Readers interested in an example of a debate in the context of understanding a historical period can read Stéphanie Didier's text "Le débat en classe: pourquoi et comment peut-on le faire?" [www.jqsi.qc.ca/?Le-debat-en-classe-pourquoi-etcomment-peut-on-le-faire].

 $^{^7\,}$ Nonetheless, it is possible to open up the discussion between the audience and the panel.

Teaching tools: teaching indicators of interaction acts

We must not lose sight of the fact that a discussion is a spontaneous act in which the individual's reflexivity is not always able to operate effectively in real time. Giving time for analysis in order to regulate such errors, even in hindsight, means offering learners the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and to give them avenues for solution. More specifically, we can guide them by suggesting specific interaction acts depending on the task (a list is provided below).

An act can also mean to "not act," so as not to interfere, or to give others the opportunity to express themselves. Several acts can occur simultaneously: when speaking, one can reformulate what a third party has said, synthesize, and demonstrate implicit approval (or disapproval). Certain actions are desirable or undesirable depending on the objective pursued. Approving everything others say is not necessarily relevant, but when the objective is to reach a common and collaborative decision, judgments, criticisms or attacks are counterproductive.

A teacher who wishes to work on oral interaction situations with their students would be well advised to ask them to record their exchanges so that they can watch them afterwards, with the help of a self-assessment grid based on specific indicators, and take a critical look at their listening and interaction skills. A few such opportunities, possibly reinforced through peer feedback, will enhance oral competence while helping to improve the quality of exchanges between students.

Table 3

Interaction acts in oral communication situations

Verbal:

speaking up; approving; disapproving; making a judgment; criticizing, attacking; cutting off; asking questions; rephrasing (one's own and others' words); expressing a doubt, hesitation, reservation; defining; formulating hypotheses; correcting oneself; retracting; indicating a change of mind or opinion; giving reasons; thinking out loud; comparing, evaluating or synthesizing opinions and arguments; identifying consequences and implications; contextualizing; making connections; using examples and counterexamples, making analogies; helping; complimenting, praising, encouraging; using formulas to seek approval or reinforcement ("isn't it?").

Paraverbal:

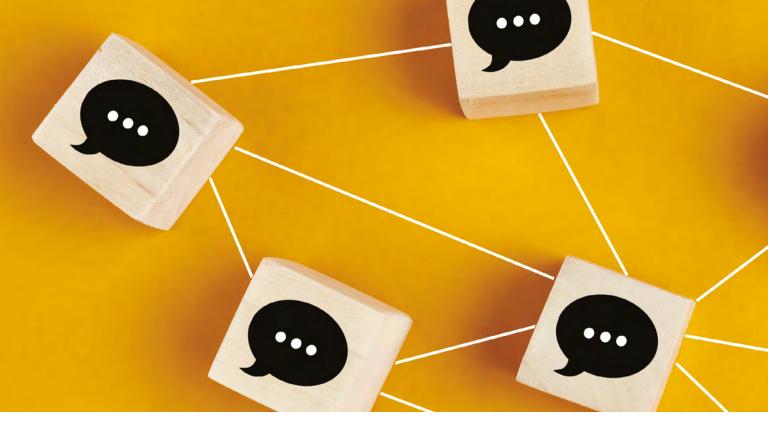
slowing down or speeding up one's speech rate; raising or lowering one's tone of voice; dramatizing one's expression; taking a humorous, ironic or interrogative tone; asking a rhetorical question.

Non-verbal:

remaining silent; listening; noting; looking at the speaker or group; responding with facial expressions or body language; refraining from physical response; crossing arms; standing and walking; moving through the group; going to the board.

Source: Adapted from Debbs (2019) and Dumais (2017, p. 14)

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Interaction acts are not limited to the list provided here, but this list can give some guidance and, when analyzing the interactions retrospectively, guide students' reflections during their exchanges.

Certainly not all members of the student community will perceive interaction in the same way: one student may feel that they are making an analogy, while another may perceive it as criticism of them. A nursing student may feel that they are showing respect by avoiding a patient's gaze while the patient is speaking, while the latter may see this as a disinterested attitude.

Let's not forget that students have generally not been evaluated often (or not at all) in a discussion-style oral communication context. Consequently, students must prepare themselves to accept comments with confidence and openness, whether they are positive or negative, concern a misunderstanding, a clarification, etc. Sharing these perceptions will promote mutual understanding. Naming an interaction act means identifying it, becoming aware of it, and possibly modifying it. Giving students the tools and the opportunity to observe themselves in the context of a discussion means drawing their attention to their behaviours in that context. Only in this way is improvement possible.

Assessing oral skills: how?

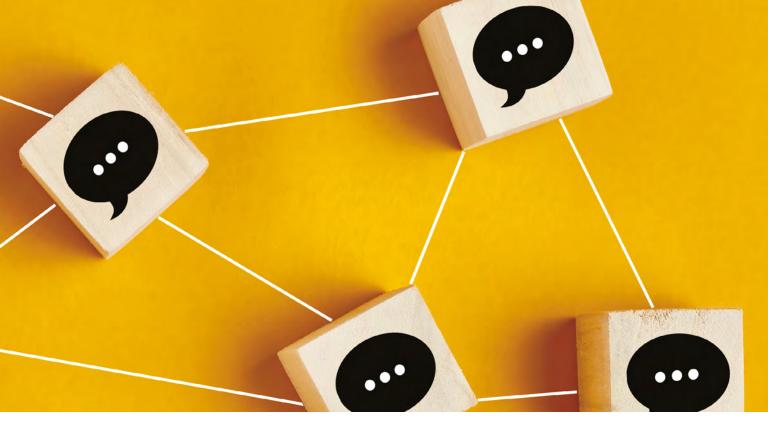
While the importance of oral skills in the success of many activities is recognized, their assessment must be aligned with their teaching.

Without explicit instruction, it would be appropriate to limit expectations, for example, by taking into account the distinctive characteristics of oral discourse (see **Table 2**). It would also

be more appropriate to limit students' oral assessment to formative exercises based on critical reflection of their own speech (Dumais, 2017, p. 17).

If oral skills have been introduced, the teacher can have higher expectations commensurate with the number of opportunities for learners to practise. By clarifying expectations, the teacher can use a specific observation grid and include students in the assessment process by having them formatively assess their peers using a grid of observable or audible facts related to the material being taught (Dumais, 2017,

⁸ Let's mention here the work done on oral communication skills at the Cégep de Victoriaville and presented at the Carrefour de la réussite in the fall of 2021 [www.cegepvicto. ca/ grand-public/competence-en-communication-orale].



p. 17). The objective of this grid is to describe, as precisely as possible, what is seen and heard in order to assess these observations subsequently. In small groups (not including the person being assessed), students can share their observations and summarize the most important points—both those that are positive and those that need improvement—before sharing them with the speaker. This allows for a more authentic exchange of ideas while taking into consideration the person being assessed.

Lentz (2009, p. 4) suggests several broad indicators that can guide teachers' thinking and actions. Some of these include:

• The student **intervenes appropriately**: they understand the issues of the communicative situation and what is being said, and intervene at the right moments to move the discussion forward;

- The student demonstrates personal engagement: they share knowledge, opinions or views and contribute new ideas:
- The student **demonstrates the ability to cooperate**: they compro-mise, interact flexibly, respect team members' roles, and use gestures that maintain communication.

The textual genre features and interaction acts proposed in this article can then be used as targeted indicators to specify what is adequate and what needs to be improved in the delivery.

Finally, it remains more prudent, and even more effective, depending on the group dynamic or the students' personalities, to have the students reflect on their own speaking; indeed, if the student's speaking has been filmed or recorded, the student will be able to watch it or listen to it as many times as they wish (Dumais, 2017, p. 18).

Conclusion

Considering that speech is a fundamental tool to support learning, cooperation and integration of the learner in their educational environment as well as in the workplace, it seems important to concern ourselves with its teaching in the same way as reading and writing. We hope, in this sense, that this article has been able to provide avenues for reflection and action to promote the development of college students' oral skills. —

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LabSEL Collective



laboratoire de soutien en enseignement des littératies

The Laboratoire de soutien en enseignement des littératies (LabSEL), a collegial center of expertise set up at Cégep Gérald-Godin in May 2018 to support college network stakeholders in their initiatives related to the development of students' literacy skills, has been holding co-training sessions on various topics related to college literacy since September 2019. At the beginning of each session, topics are chosen by LabSEL members (reflective writing, oral skills, multimodal literacy, etc.). Each member must then submit a text be parti-cipants that relates to the chosen theme. The co-training follows the model of reading circles and is open to anyone who wishes to participate, in person or virtually. For more information, we invite those interested to contact the LabSEL or to consult its website: [labsel.cgodin.qc.ca].

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