COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING IN ONLINE SPACES

A Guide for Instructors

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges for communities and grassroots, nonprofit and public organizations. The health, social and economic effects on communities have been devastating and nonprofit organizations in Ontario are reporting a state of crisis in their finances, human resources and program and service delivery.[1] At the same time, social distancing imperatives have necessitated new modes of course delivery and courses may need to be online/remote and/or flexibly move between online and in-person spaces in the coming year(s).

The collisions between the effects of the pandemic on communities, community organizations and educational institutions presents challenges for community-engaged learning (CEL) as it has often been practiced. Many organizations may have limited capacity to create opportunities for students (whether in-person or remote). However, there is also the possibility that some organizations can identify some important community priorities that students can support remotely through their CEL courses. If so, social distancing requirements and the impact of the pandemic on the non-profit sector and communities broadly, will require that instructors re-imagine how they are delivering community-engaged learning.

This document provides an overview of models of community-engaged learning in a time of social distancing to support instructors in identifying approaches best suited to their course learning objectives. It will address:

- the Centre for Community Partnerships' criteria for a CEL initiative
- models for remote CEL
- alternative course activities to support your learning objectives

What is a "community-engaged learning" initiative?

For the CCP, a "community-engaged learning" initiative has the following qualities:

1. It takes place in partnership with a community, or a grassroots, nonprofit, or public organization
2. It responds to community-defined priorities
3. It is reciprocal so that both community partners and students benefit from the engagement
4. Students undertake reflection that connects their community engagement to the learning outcomes of the initiative

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1   Ontario Nonprofit Network. Ontario Nonprofits and the Impact of COVID-19: A flash survey report. April 6, 2020.

Models of Remote CEL

The Consultation Model

Community partner(s) identify and introduce challenges. Students work remotely, typically in groups, to devise responses or solutions. Partner organization(s) involvement can include presenting challenge(s) to students, periodically providing input, and sharing feedback on students' final projects.

Examples:

- A community partner wants to communicate the benefits of harm reduction to the general public. Students work in teams to create a communications strategy.
- A community partner wishes to move its exercise programs online. In groups, students research best practices for online exercise programming, and develop a new online curriculum.

Key considerations:

- Community partners may have varying capacity to provide input over the arc of the course, so instructors may need to provide interim feedback.
- Clear communication with community partners about expectations is vital.

The Project Model

Working individually or in groups, students contribute to initiatives led by community partners, without necessarily working towards a predetermined outcome.

Examples:

- A community partner wishes to create multilingual brochures about COVID-19 and social distancing. Students research best practices and make recommendations on design and content.
- Students help deliver a community partner's new online arts programming for youth.

Key considerations:

- Partners may have less capacity to supervise students than usual. Instructors may need to be more involved, and may want to consider integrating student peer feedback and support.
- Partners' timelines may be urgent, requiring flexibility from instructors and students.

The One-on-One Programming Model

Each student is paired with one individual from or through the partner organization.

Examples:

- A student meets weekly with a senior citizen for social time, or tutors a high school student.
- A student meets weekly with a social sector mentor.

Key considerations:

- Students may need specific training prior to beginning their one-on-one relationship.
- Work is synchronous and should take place at a regular scheduled time.
- Irregular student attendance or dropping the course can have a deep impact on their partner.

Alternatives to CEL: Activities to Support Learning Objectives

You may be able to reach your course learning objectives through alternative, non-CEL activities.

Objective: To link theory to practice

- Case study
  Students can learn to connect theory to practice by analyzing case studies.
- Case competition
  The instructor poses a challenge from a case study, and student groups compete to provide solutions, often within a fixed time frame.

Key considerations: Ask close community partners for example cases.

Objective: To learn from community expertise and/or lived experience

- Guest visits
  Community members/workers with lived/work experience related to learning objectives are invited to give a guest lecture, sit on a virtual panel, and/or engage in a Q&A with students.

Key consideration: Honoraria should be provided.

- Assigned texts
  Community member or non-academic authored texts are integrated into required readings.

Key consideration: Consider a range of sources: grey literature, podcasts, art, life writing, etc.

Objective: To gain hands-on professional experience

- In-class professional projects
  Students work together or individually on a project that requires professional skills. For example, students write op-eds, policy briefs, a report for a fictional board of directors.
- Remote networking
  Opportunities are created that bring students into contact with guests from the community.

Key considerations: Honoraria should be paid. Consider inviting past partners or alumni.

Objective: To involve students in solidarity, activist or social justice work

- In-class activist project
  Students work together or individually on an activist project. For example, students start an advocacy campaign or a podcast series.
- Course research project
  Students could contribute to an existing source (eg. writing new wikipedia pages for local community activists/organizations) or undertake new research (eg. studying how local communities are organizing and demonstrating resilience in the face of COVID-19).

Key considerations: As much as possible projects should be informed by the communities they are engaging with and respond to community priorities through an anti-oppressive, assets-based approach.