Division of
Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation

Frames and tools for online Experiential Learning at UVic: Focus on Community-Engaged Learning

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Prepared by the Community-Engaged Learning Office
CEL in a nutshell

Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) is a form of experiential learning and community-engaged scholarship whereby students actively engage with course content through the combination of collaborations with community and facilitated reflection (known in some disciplines as analysis). The community (both on and off campus) is broadly defined and includes community groups, businesses, governmental and non-governmental agencies, industry, First Nation communities, etc.

At the core of CEL is the reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnership between community, faculty and students. This partnership facilitates an active interchange of knowledge both to the community from the student and to the student from the community. Additionally, the activities in the learning process contribute to community.

There are a number of ways that the engagement between the community, the student and the instructor can happen, including research, projects, outreach, participation, creative activity and business plans. The level of engagement is negotiated between students, instructors and community partners according to their needs, expectations, and capacity. Details of the CEL initiative, including the responsibilities and desired outcomes of all partners, are co-developed with support from the instructor or the CEL coordinator. Desired deliverables are negotiated according to course learning objectives and community needs, and the students’ work responds to that agreement. For example, a poster presentation done by students as part of a communications class might be relevant for the outreach program of a community group.

Key considerations for CEL

Reciprocity with community partners

- Hosting students can be a lot of work. Some community partners are unable to work with students at this time. When CEL is possible, develop collaborations that are appropriate (given community and student capacity), meaningful for both community and students, and likely to contribute to community endeavours. Foster respect and accountability in the collaboration.

Build community – in the “classroom” and with community partners

- So much of the richness of CEL is found in the relationships and community that are developed. Facilitate peer to peer interactions and opportunities to learn from one another’s collaborations. Model and foster clear and open communication and create opportunities for students to build relationships with community partners.

Privacy and security

- Online tools (whether your teaching tools or community partners’ work tools) raise privacy and security issues. Educate yourself, choose wisely and be transparent with students about this.

Remember reflection!

- Facilitated reflection is the bridge between course content and community experiences. The five Cs of reflection are Continuous, Connected, Challenging, Contextualized and Coaching (Eyler and Giles, 1999).
Access to technology for students and community

- Not everyone can or wants to be online for all interactions. Communicate preferences and use alternatives (like the telephone) where appropriate.

Equity and safety when considering face-to-face or hybrid CEL opportunities

- When it is appropriate for students to engage face-to-face with community, ensure all protocols are met and apply for an exemption through your department.

Some learning objectives may need to change (if possible and appropriate), particularly when required technical, hands-on skills practice is not possible.

Tools for online CEL

Use collaborative documents in Microsoft Teams for discussion and for editing deliverables with peers and community partners.

Zoom Q&A with community partners.

Give some class time for group (in Microsoft Teams or Zoom breakout rooms) or individual work on community projects and use the opportunity to check in with students on their work.

Contact the CEL Office to connect with community, hone projects and develop activities and assessment that foster meaningful community-engaged learning.

A story of online CEL

Northern European Urban Sustainability Field School (GEOG 391; Professor Cam Owens)

This field school was canceled due to covid19. Dr. Owens decided to run one part of the course – GEOG 406: Sustainable Cities – in an online, community-engaged format. He worked with municipal and non-profit partners to identify projects that would contribute to community and benefit the student learning experience. This course aims for students to build the knowledge and skills to identify and respond to challenges and opportunities for building economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable and resilient cities. The field school typically involves visits with many sustainable city innovators, including Cycling Without Age (CWA) in Copenhagen. The founder of CWA filmed himself bicycling around social and ecological sustainability sites in Copenhagen and then met with students online for a Q&A. The students did small-scale research projects for Island Transportation Organization, NetZero Victoria and the City of Victoria Climate Action team. Dr. Owens facilitated reflection discussions in Zoom, on virtual white boards, and on collaborative Teams documents. The students presented their final projects to community partners over Zoom. There was positive feedback both relating to contribution to community and to students’ learning experience satisfaction.