Co-Designing Community-Engaged Learning with Community Partners

A Guide for Instructors

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide provides strategies for actively engaging with grassroots, nonprofit, or public organizations for the purpose of co-designing community-engaged learning (CEL) courses. Co-designing CEL courses with community partners involves collaborating with partners to ensure the engagement addresses community priorities and student learning outcomes. Co-design can also help to establish that in CEL courses, resources are shared, and power imbalances are addressed. By inviting partners to be co-educators of students, this approach likewise recognizes and values the expertise and lived experience of community partners.

This guide is designed to support the course co-design process by providing a definition of CEL, principles for equitable community engagement, and strategies for course instructors. While all CEL course partnerships should be driven by community partner priorities, this guide provides strategies to allow instructors to engage their community partners even more deeply and foundationally in their course design process.

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

At the Centre for Community Partnerships (CCP), we collaborate with community partners, students, faculty, and staff to advance community-engaged learning and research (CEL/R) through building community, enhancing capacity, and learning together. Through CEL/R, we aim to cultivate communities that are rooted in reciprocity, equity, and solidarity and contribute to positive social change. As a tri-campus Centre of Excellence, we provide training, convene networks and communities of practice, develop resources, share knowledge and experience, and offer consultations to develop, deliver, and enhance CEL/R initiatives across the University.

www.communitypartnerships.utoronto.ca

DEFINING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING

The CCP defines CEL as a form of experiential learning (EL) that is distinguished by four key characteristics. CEL is:

- Enabled through partnerships with communities or grassroots, non-profit or public organizations
- Responsive to community-defined priorities
- Rooted in reciprocity, where community partners and students all benefit from the engagement
- Supported by reflection, where students connect community engagement to defined learning objectives

SOME KEY PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

Guiding principles that underpin working with community partners include:

Commitment to community-identified priorities

Student engagement should be designed to respond to community-identified priorities and should minimize the burden on the time, and other resources, of community partners.

Commitment to reciprocity

Community partners should benefit from student contributions to its priorities. Students should also benefit through opportunities to reflectively integrate what they are learning in their community engagement with what they are learning in the course. Safeguarding reciprocity requires patience, flexibility, and adaptability.

Commitment to equity

Given power imbalances between the University and community organizations, and the persistence of structural exclusions, CEL should foster resource-sharing and transparent expectations for contributions of time, expertise, and financial resources.

CO-DESIGNING CEL WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Co-designing a CEL course with community partners can include a range of opportunities for collaboration, including inviting community partner feedback when first imagining a course, working together to co-develop the curriculum or learning activities, or co-teaching a course. Co-design can help to ensure that the course responds to community-identified priorities, that community partners and students benefit from the engagement, that resources are shared, and power imbalances are addressed. This approach both recognizes the expertise and lived experience of community partners and values it by truly framing your partners as co-educators of your students.

When co-designing CEL courses with community partners, instructors might consider the following practices.

Recommended Practices at a Glance

1. Plan Ahead
2. Prioritize Relationship Building
3. Exercise Flexibility
4. Prepare your Students
5. Encourage Student Reflection
6. Evaluate
7. Seek Support

1. Plan ahead

- When co-designing CEL, involve community partner(s) early in the course development process, ideally at least one term in advance of the course start date. Involvement may include:

- For a new course: starting any potential course with a brainstorming conversation with prospective community partners. What do they think students should learn about the area of study? What kind of course and partnerships format would most benefit their work?

- Consider how the proposed area of study is mutually beneficial to the community partner, the academic institution, and the students

- Inviting community partners to discuss how students can meet their priorities through the learning objectives of existing courses.

- Sending partner(s) a draft copy of the syllabus for their review.

- Welcoming community partners to contribute to the development of student reflection, assignments, and assessment.

- Co-drafting a terms of reference, a document which outlines the objectives, roles, time commitment, timeline, and supervisory responsibilities

associated with the community engagement aspect of the CEL course. A terms of reference can serve as a guide for instructors and community partners, providing a clear understanding of the goals of the engagement, and ensuring that the learning objectives and expectations of the course align with community partner's priorities.

- Discussing in advance how you will collectively handle disagreements or challenges. How will decisions be made? How will instructors and community partners course-correct when necessary?

Engaging community partners early can help to ensure that the necessary resources are in place for both the university and community partners and allow instructors to be proactive about equitable partnership development. As Trisha Scantlebury of the United Way Greater Toronto explains, the opportunity to engage early also allows community partners to authentically contribute to, and benefit from, the partnership:

> "When we are so limited and pressed for time, we don't just want to be a box that gets ticked on an application. We really want to have that meaningful engagement. The more time that instructors and community partners have to engage with each other will strengthen the concepts of the project, enabling the co-design of a project that is meaningful and beneficial to both parties."

Scantlebury, T. (2022, September 20).
Centre for Community Partnerships CEL Faculty Roundtable:
Co-Designing with Community Partners [Panelist]

2. Prioritize relationship building

Building strong relationships with community partners based on trust, mutual respect, and shared goals is central to co-designing CEL. Relationship building involves:

- Ongoing consultation, collaboration, commitment and patience.

- Maintaining open communication so instructors and community partners understand each other's perspectives, constraints, and expectations and so all parties can articulate what is "meaningful" for them, which might look different in every case.

- Understanding the ways in which community organizations are facing mounting challenges, and finding ways to design courses that work to address these challenges.

- Considering multiple ways to engage with your partner over time: look for ways to share resources, attend community partner events, and ask how you can best support their organization even outside of your course.

Building relationships of trust, Ahmed Allahwala from the Department of Human Geography at University of Toronto Scarborough notes, often takes time. Relationships with community partners are strongest, he explains, when the focus is on long-term relationship building,

> "[My community partner] and I have a 10-year relationship and we can draw from that in terms of trust. We also understand that there will be some more successful projects and some less successful projects, but that the relationship is sustained over the years."
>
> Allahwala, A. (2022, September 20).
> Centre for Community Partnerships CEL Faculty Roundtable:
> Co-Designing with Community Partners [Panelist]

3. Exercise flexibility

Co-designing CEL requires flexibility on the part of instructors who may typically be used to independently defining the terms of their courses. As Aditi Mehta from the Urban Studies Program at the University of Toronto demonstrates through her CEL course, flexibility can take many forms. For example, the development of the syllabus and assignments in her course are iterative and informed by community partner input and priorities:

> "The syllabus is a plan that's in progress throughout the course. You can be open to a pedagogy of improvisation because you don't exactly know what's going to happen... That's okay and it's important to set the groundwork with students and to make sure that they understand that "Yes, we have this plan, but we might shift at any point because of organizational needs or because of your experience."
>
> Mehta, A. (2022, September 20).
> Centre for Community Partnerships CEL Faculty Roundtable:
> Co-Designing with Community Partners [Panelist]

Other examples of flexibility include:

- Designing CEL course requirements in a way that students can complete the requirements even if the community partner relationship is facing challenges.
- Acknowledging, and being open to negotiating, the differences in modes of working and timelines between university contexts and organizational contexts. For example, instructors should be mindful of unnecessarily transferring their sense of urgency to meet university deadlines, onto community partners who do not operate on the academic calendar.

- Considering how the outputs that are most often recognized in an academic setting may not necessarily be the outputs that are most useful in a community setting and vice versa. For instance, instructors may be interested in publishing scholarly research with their community partners, which may not be a priority for that partner. Instructors are encouraged to find ways to co-create and share knowledge with community partners that are not taxing on partners, or on the community that partners support.

4. Prepare your students

Ensuring students are prepared to engage with community partners and have the skills to undertake their part of the engagement contributes to meaningful placement experiences for students, community partners, and the communities that partners support. Instructors should attend to student preparation early in the course, and when possible, before the engagement officially begins. Student preparation could involve:

- Clarifying community partners' expectations for students' knowledge, skill, and abilities.

- Providing students with the necessary support, training, and resources so they are equipped to engage effectively with community partners. This may include offering students CEL orientations, workshops, mentoring, or access to relevant tools and technologies.

- Ensuring students have a foundational understanding of what the community partner's priorities are, and how these priorities were identified by the community partner, who the community partners are supporting, who uses the community partner's services, and the context of this audience.

Franco Taverna from the Human Biology Program at the University of Toronto explains:

"I start preparing my students before the course... Knowing what the partner requires for intake and onboarding information also helps. I gather this information weeks or months before the placement starts. Once the course begins...[I] review with students the key elements of professional conduct and communication. Fostering curiosity in students by developing in-class opportunities for them to learn more about the sector and organization they will be engaging with is another way to prepare students."

Taverna, F. (2022, September 20).
Centre for Community Partnerships CEL Faculty Roundtable:
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5. Encourage student reflection

Creating opportunities for reflection helps to enhance student learning and can both inform future offerings of the course and strengthen current and future community partner relationships. Reflection has been called a core methodology of CEL pedagogy because it allows students to deliberately integrate their knowledge and experience. It is essential in CEL because, typically, students are evaluated on their learning, not the community experience itself.

Reflection assignments allow instructors to document and assess student learning and create a space for students to make meaning of their community placement experience (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Reflection assignments should be iterative and structured. Examples of reflection assignments can include asking students to apply course concepts to their community work, to consider their own identities in relation to often marginalized communities, or to think through next steps on an issue or conflict they encounter in their CEL placement. For more examples visit the Centre for Community Partnerships Community-Engaged Learning Resource site.

In CEL, reflection also helps to strengthen community partner relationships, providing community partners with unique insights and perspectives on what is working in the engagement experience and areas for potential future development and growth. As Gabriel Eidelman at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy suggests,

"From the students' perspective, the reflection piece … [is] when it really clicks. In many of my courses students either have a public blog or some other public space to publish their thoughts about the process. When presenting to a community partner, they reflect on what went well [in their engagement], what they would do differently next time, and what they learned in the process. [These high-level learnings] are things that you can pass on to both your current partners and to future partners."

Eidelman, G. (2022, September 20).
Centre for Community Partnerships CEL Faculty Roundtable:
Co-Designing with Community Partners [Panelist].

Reflection can take many forms and is most effective when it is iterative. Examples of reflection related to the course partnership include:

- **Before the engagement:** Prompting students to consider their goals for the placement before the placement begins. Ask students what kinds of skills and competencies they would like to develop and what kinds of goals they have for their own personal, academic, career and civic development.

- **During the engagement:** Encouraging students to consider their learning, the impact of the engagement on the community, and the ethical considerations of their work through reflection assignments and activities

- **After the engagement:** Offering space for post-placement reflection, where students can make meaning of their placement experience through deliberately integrating it with the knowledge they have developed in the course. High level reflections on how the placement went for students, with students' permission, can be shared with community partners and help inform future courses.

6. Evaluate

Another step in the co-design process is to regularly evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the community-engaged learning course. Instructors should invite feedback from both students and community partners to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for further collaboration. Evaluation can involve:

- Inviting community partners to a shared meal and feedback session

- Visiting community partners at their organization for a meeting to ask for feedback and ways to improve the course for next time

- Discussing the co-design process itself with community partners. What worked and what are areas for improvement?

Undertaking evaluation alongside community partners can help to support and nurture long-term relationships with community partners beyond the duration of the CEL initiative. As Gabriel Eidelman at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy simply states, in all stages of the CEL co-designing process, "feedback is crucial."

7. Seek support

The University of Toronto's EL and CEL units and staff, including the Centre for Community Partnerships, can support instructors and community partners undertaking the challenging work of co-designing a CEL course. The units engaged in this work may offer a range of CEL-related programs, services, and resources including:

- Course consultations, syllabus and assignment review
- CEL events, programs and communities of practice
- Community partnership building
- Databases of CEL resources including archived syllabi, assignments and scholarship
- Funding opportunities for CEL
- Institutional CEL way-finding support
- Community partner recognition programs, such as access to university library cards and other university programs, services, and resources.

Howard Moriah of the Boys and Girls Club, Durham explains the importance of these institutional supports,

"[Our relationship with a community-engagement office at the university] helped us to connect with other parties within the institution, to better prepare to support the students, and ensure that we [the community partner] are also benefiting from the work that is going to be done."

Moriah, H. (2022, September 20).
Centre for Community Partnerships CEL Faculty Roundtable:
Co-Designing with Community Partners [Panelist].

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Eidelman, G. (2022, September 20). Centre for Community Partnerships CEL Faculty Roundtable: *Co-Designing with Community Partners* [Panelist].

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