

Practical Learning
with Dr. Fred Cutler

In which courses do you use Practical Learning? And how many students are generally in the course?

It is one of the general courses called “Issues in Canadian Politics”, which is being taught by other faculty members as well. In my section, this year we have 24 students, but we have had up to 50. Typically, we have students in the range of 30-50 in the class. We have tried this course at the third year and fourth year level but going forward it will be POLI 308.

What does Practical Learning mean in your discipline/course?

Well, to me a lot of it is about the kind of writing and analysis students are doing. We try to give them group learning activities with the objective of studying a policy area, in which they gather information regarding a policy area from various sources, analyse it, and try to get an in-depth understanding of its total landscape. By this I mean, the understanding of not just the formal government policies, but all the actors, organizations, ideas, and evidence that go into making and eventual implementation of a policy in a particular area.

My intention is to give the students an opportunity to experience the kind of work they would do in a government or a non-governmental organization where the broad policy context needs to be understood. A big part of that is the writing, learning how to write clear prose in a professional mode, so, I have them produce content for a website that could be public, and it actually has been. That kind of writing is very challenging for our students who are socialized into academic writing and have trouble simplifying their writing style. So in this class we reorient them and have them write in a style that is more typical of effective writing in the careers that they are likely to pursue.

Why do you incorporate Practical Learning?

I do not think that the students get enough of it. Fundamentally my highest-level learning objective in the course is for the students to be able to understand all the elements that go into drafting and implementation of a policy. We study that in the Canadian context, but the principles can be applied to any democratic country. So, I want them to be able to gain an understanding at a certain broad level, perhaps similar to what they may learn in a public policy process course. And then I want the students to get some practice doing the things that they can anticipate when working in one such professional setting.

What is an example of a course in which you used Practical Learning? What activities did the students undertake during the course to develop their skills?

It is POLI 308, which is a semester long group project where I provide a framework and the students are really discovering, rather than learning. The students gather sources of all kinds that will contribute to an understanding of a policy area- the “total policy landscape” as I call it. They curate the materials, categorize them, and decide as a group how to remix and present that information to explain what is going on in their

particular policy area. Students develop their ability to search online for a wide variety of types of information and organize it for maximum comprehension for their audience.

The group project is one long activity. Students do several things- they gather the information, they categorize it, they decide on its relevance, organize it, and then present it. They use a wide variety and a large number of sources, so to manage those sources I have them use a database. The students use a platform called Notion to sort and categorize their sources, which may include policy documents, news stories, public opinion surveys, academic analyses, parliamentary debates, or records of events like speeches, demonstrations, or community consultations. The next step is assigning properties in the database, such as how relevant something is, what aspects of the issue it touches, and what is the source of the information. This gives students some skills in using a database and using a systematic approach to information-curation. Students use their Notion space also for the writing of content for a website. The website is a guide to the total policy landscape for the issue. Over three years, some of these projects have been made available at issueguides.ca. A previous iteration of the course, with the whole class as one group, produced uvotebc.ca, a site to inform citizens as they made their decision in the British Columbia Electoral Referendum of 2018.

In these projects the focus is on writing to directly communicate facts rather than make an argument. The students are often reporting or distilling the arguments of the participants involved in a policy discourse. In the final few weeks of the course, there is a focus on developing skills of editing and giving and receiving feedback.

How did you assess students' development of Practical Learning skills?

Assessment is, naturally, suited to the student production in the course, which is more about the process than the final group product. An individual course log carries the most weight. Students are expected at least two-three times a week to write a log entry on what they did, what challenges they faced, how did they overcome those challenges, and the skills they were developing.

I also have them do a peer evaluation for a small part of the grade, where they assess the contributions of the other members of their group. To connect the course to career skills development, they make an ePortfolio using the ubcars.ca platform. The portfolio is a space to articulate some of the things they have done in the course, along with some of the other career-relevant experiences they have had outside the course.

Did you feel the students achieved your intended learning outcomes for the course? Why or why not? What did students share about their experience with the Practical Learning activities?

Yes, I think that the students achieved the intended learning outcomes. They are all starting at different levels with some of these skills, so for many of the students it is a big challenge. By the end of the term, however, they are of the view that it was a real struggle, but they are glad to have done it. Many can see that their skills have improved, and others have at least gained an idea of the kind of skills that would be required in their careers. The students are generally happy to have had an opportunity to practice those skills and develop them a bit.

What are some changes or improvements which you wish to include in future?

I am learning that I have to provide the students with modeling of the skills. But I worry about doing it too much because their educational socialization is just to mimic the things exactly as they are shown. I feel this tension where I don't want to show them how to do some things in too much detail because they will likely try to match what I show them too strictly. So I would like to find the right balance on that.

I would also like to have them figure out the style of writing for this course earlier in the course, so it is not such a struggle later. I need to provide more assignments, earlier, to practice this kind of writing. I would also like the course to have more community impact and may try to connect the projects to organizations in the community more explicitly.

Do you have any suggestions for instructors considering this Practical Learning for their course?

I would say be prepared for more of an emotional journey, to the extent you are unsettling the ways that students do the sorts of academic production that are typical in their courses up to that point in their studies. Be prepared for them to be uncomfortable and for you to have to coach them. And I would say that group work always has some predictable challenges, which you need to accept, and the grading should be more aligned with the effort that the students have put in.

On the tech side, my advice is finding the right student group work collaboration platform and provide it to them as a structure. I use Notion because it can be a collaboration space, which can be turned into a website without building a website separately. But I know that instructors can use and just have students use Google Docs, where you would mandate certain ways of organizing information and naming conventions for folders and files. Google docs are best for giving feedback on ongoing student work throughout the term.