

Practical Learning  
with Dr. Neil Armitage

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

I suppose in the context of how you are defining practical learning, that is trying to get students to actually develop skills and things that they could take outside the classroom into their future careers or into their future lives, I have integrated it in my first-year and third-year courses from time to time and I usually teach only one course per term because of the extra resources and time it often requires.

This year I am teaching two sections of a 100-level course which is SOCI 100, Inequality and Social Change. The first-year courses tend to have more students, so we have students ranging from 100 to 250. There is also a class called Social Inequality, which is a third-year course that is manifested often through engaging with units on campus, and also with an organization called City Studio, who run more experiential kind of practical learning and projects in connection with the City of Vancouver. In my third-year course, my philosophy is that students can opt in or opt out, because if I am engaging with community partners, I want students that are motivated. If they feel like it is just something they have to do as part of the course, sometimes you may undermine, the actual purpose of why you are doing it.

In my first year I take a different approach, the students are doing something good and fun and there is not too much commitment on behalf of the student. The third year is more term-long projects where they are doing work and going a bit more advanced and having to do more analysis, a case study, and I need students that are engaged.

**What does Practical Learning mean in your discipline/course?**

I look at learning holistically, and I believe that everything that you learn should be capable of being practical somewhere. I am always wanting students to think not just that a particular concept is something to learn, but something that they can use as a lens to understand and interpret the world, and to place themselves in that world.

In essence I want anything I teach to be applicable in the sense that the students can think through and use it for their own understanding and just to be able to understand themselves better, understand their relationships better, understand their context better. That is practical, in my opinion. It is not just learning for learning's sake but learning for utility. Here "utility" can include self-utility, utility towards others, utility towards the community, mutualistic towards society. I do not really see practical learning purely and simply in terms of professional skills. I also see it in terms of life skills and just being more engaged citizen. They can do this and learn from this to secure themselves a position or job, but that's just part of it. I also want them to know how knowledge and knowledge production works.

**Why do you incorporate Practical Learning?**

The objective here is to show the students the complexity of the activities that they undertake, such as data collection and conducting interviews, and also to expose them to what comes after that, like, how do you collate and analyse the data? I want the students to see the intrinsic value of doing this type of work through more of the informal outside of classroom activities and other practical learning activities. In my opinion, it enhances their classroom experience because it makes what they are reading in class relevant. I also want them to think if they are doing this for themselves, or for the greater good. Of course, they can do it for both, but where is the emphasis? Where is the motivation? That is what I want them to analyse.

### **What is an example of a course in which you used Practical Learning? How did it work?**

It is the SOCI 102 course, where we do alumni interviewing. Throughout the term the students work in several discussion groups week-to-week on different smaller assignments, with the intention that by the end of the term when it comes to doing the interview assignment, they know who they can work with. We then match each group with an alum. I set up some roles within the group and provide some clear instructions. The group members coordinate with the alum to schedule the interview. This assignment gives the students an opportunity to use concrete research skills such as designing and conducting a research interview and demonstrating their capacity to analyse and present data through the sociological lens.

I think that the students have this kind of very linear idea of what career looks like, and it is good to hear from alumni who are doing jobs and have careers that look quite different to their education. Some jobs are clearly linked to the education, but professional life is not always that simple. By interviewing the alumni, the students get to know about the life, post-graduation, and about how certain other aspects, and even serendipity, shape what alumni do. Additionally, students build collaborative relationships with each other throughout the term by participating in discussion groups and a shared experience outside of the classroom, and eventually analyzing the alumni interview as a group before submitting individual essays.

Apart from these, I do multiple small things. One activity that I have done in the past in terms of looking around Truth and Reconciliation is asking the students to read the history of the Musqueam house posts, walk around campus. I ask the students to look at the Musqueam material culture that is on campus and see how it reflects the existing relationship of UBC and the Musqueam, as well as the changes in that relationship. Instead of teaching the history again in the class, I try to get them to visit sites, monuments, and other things such as the house posts, and to study and see how those reflect the relationship between UBC and the Musqueam at a certain time. Interacting with something more tangible helps them to build concrete connections.

### **What activities did the students do to develop Practical Learning skills? What did the students share about their experience?**

The students, may be in groups of three or four, do the interview with one alum, for which I gave some instructions on how to approach and set up. For example, if they are having an interview of about an hour long, I ask them to have max five questions and maybe some sub-questions for probing or prompting further. But they do not have to follow it by the rule, which makes this another activity, formulating the format and length of the interview. I tend not to over-prescribe with the intention of preparing the students for the future where they are able to design their own instructions, that they can figure it out for themselves. I wish to retain the atmosphere of freedom, creativity, exploration, transformation, that thing that you want them to experience. You will get the benefits if there is an emotional connection.

Individually, all the students write an essay at the end of it. The individual essay is connected to the interview and the activities that they do as a group, so investment in the group activity will play out in the strength of the individual essay.

I have evaluated the work both at the first and the third level, and the students had a positive outlook. These activities, such as interviewing the alumni and getting acquainted with the career complexities, and working in the field with the community partners, provide a good learning experience to the students, and they are generally excited about gaining this kind of knowledge and experience. I also get the feedback from the students that they would like to return as alumni.

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

I ask every student to write an essay at the end. Whilst there may be three or four students doing the interview together for with one alum, they all individually write an essay. The essay is an attempt to capture their experience and learning through the activities that they have undertaken. They need to deconstruct the data that they have gathered during the term up till the final interview, think through it, use concepts to analyse it, and present it. Everyone learns at their own pace, some get there quicker than others, but they all have to start somewhere, and I guide them through this process. But everyone wants to write a good essay because they want to respect the time, and the process that they have gone through to get the data. The logistics of the assignment is graded 5%, and the overall essay constitutes 20% of the course grade. The essay is graded on the strength of student analysis and insights, and the use of sociological ideas and concepts to frame their essays.

Having gone through the entire process of organizing, formulating questions, asking the questions, taking notes, and analyzing, they are gaining more than the facts. The objective here is to show the students the complexity of the activities that they undertake, such as data collection and conducting interviews, and also to expose them to what comes after that, like, how do you collate and analyse the data?

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

I have thought about doing the interviews at the start of the term and then spend the rest of the term, and then spending the rest of the term with the students sharing about their respective interviews.

Every year, we have about thirty to fifty interviews, the data gets analyzed by each respective group and they produce the essays, using a significant number of hours of work, so I am also considering how I could use all these interviews to create a course. A lot of elements are obviously connected with such a project, analysing all the information from the interviews, the ethics of using that information towards demonstration of concepts in class, and similar factors.

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

Keep it simple. Try to find support within staff units and others that can help and assist you. I would not be able to do this without the help from our alumni engagement team and my relationship with staff such as Christine Lee and Rashaad Ali. It is just a matter of finding those partners and those who have similar ideas and similar ways.