

Practical Learning with Dr. Kerry Greer

In which courses do you use Practical Learning and why do you incorporate it?

I use practical learning in SOCI 100 Introduction to Sociology – Coordinated Arts Program, SOCI 380 Sociological Methods: Survey Research, and SOCI 480 Urban Ethnographic Field School. In the past, I have incorporated practical learning in SOCI 301 Sociology of Development and Under-development, where I had students produce infographics of concepts to demonstrate their learning, and the students had to present and explain those to their classmates. Even in my theory class I have had students write about theoretical ways of understanding contemporary issues and helps them appreciate the value of classical and contemporary theorists in providing insights into understanding our social world. In most of my courses, practical learning comes into play in some way; obviously, the ones that are hands-on, like working with community groups, have the most solid connection.

Broadly speaking, my pedagogical approach is to tie what students are learning in their courses to professional skill sets. I try to balance that goal with the purpose of the courses for the curriculum. For some courses it is easier to incorporate professional learning, and then in some courses it is more challenging, but I try to include practical aspects in most of my courses because I think that is it both necessary and a great strategy to give students a better learning experience.

What does Practical Learning mean in your discipline/course?

In my discipline, public sociology is considered to be the area where activism happens. I am a strong believer in the concept that a liberal arts education makes for a better civil society, I also think that as a university professor it is important for me to keep an eye on students' ability to get a job after completing their degrees. Other factors, such as the increasing education cost, also influence my idea that the students need skills to compete in the job market. So, what I try to make explicit to the students is the connection between what they are doing in the classroom and how it relates to their prospective careers. For instance, my students worked on a paper some time ago and I told them that they needed to edit their document before turning it in. I stressed that going out in this world as university graduates, they need to be able to format a paper in Microsoft Word.

For me, practical learning also means helping students think about their longer-term goals and bringing those conversations into moments of the curriculum wherever possible. For instance, if I am teaching about work, I want students to think about the kind of life they would want, a sixty-hour work week, working full time and having kids, and such, and we consider how work plays out over the life course. We discuss other realities, like women exiting the work force after having children even with advanced degrees, the changing families, and we try to understand these in the context of our own lives.

Whether it is tying the learning to professional goals by explicitly giving them opportunities to work on and develop skills they may require in their careers, or just broadly thinking about it, I always bring the world of work forward, even when it may be something that is not related to their immediate futures. I think that it is valuable for the students to understand how the activities and learning over the course of their student life have transformed and build their professional skills, and I find that creating an ePortfolio, using the UBC Arts Wordpress tool, is a good way to do that. So, I include this in an assignment- building the ePortfolio and updating it regularly.

How does practical learning work in your course?

In my Introduction to Sociology class, thirty percent of the grade is some community engaged learning, which is a fairly substantial part. In such courses this emphasis takes away some of the emphasis on memorization of concepts and this aligns with my interest in enabling students to apply concepts learned in class to real-world examples, rather than just being able to define them on an exam. In my Urban Ethnographic Field School, the course is entirely centered on communities and focuses on working with groups. So, in my courses practical learning can go from being a fairly small part of the course to pretty much the bulk of the course.

What activities did the students undertake to develop their skills?

With this kind of learning I hope that the students become more capable of clearly articulating and communicating what they want to say. Also, being able to understand the connection between what we are doing in the classroom and what is going on in the world and talk about those connections in a way that reflects both a deep understanding of the course material and an understanding of social processes that they may have seen and experienced is really important to me.

The activities involve a lot of engagement with different groups, such as on-campus groups at UBC and community partners. The selection of community partners is determined by the learning goals of the particular course. For example, first-year students in Introduction to Sociology are encouraged to partner with schools, youth organizations, and other organizations that are addressing general aspects of social inequality, while students in the Urban Ethnographic Field School work with some community organizations located in high-poverty areas and are addressing inequality through more complex strategies.

In SOCI 480, which is a co-instructed intensive 6-credit course, students start the term with a Launch Lunch where they are introduced to their partner organizations over lunch. With a thematic focus on food security, students spend six weeks “in the field” working with their community partner while learning the advanced research method of ethnography during 12-hours per week of classroom-based instruction. We do not put boundaries around what the project is; rather we make sure that it is something that the students can get involved in and gain some experience from. At the end of the semester, we have what we call the mini conference, where community partners and students come together to consolidate their learning and share their experiences. By the end of this the students would have learnt how non-profit organizations, or more broadly, civil society, works within the context of addressing social problems. The students can use that knowledge, and they often do, to figure out exactly what they want to do in terms of careers. In this context, this course gives them a sense of working in a professional setting, working in the helping industries, how those helping industries work, and the students develop their communication skills, and gain a deep understanding of an advanced qualitative research method.

In the class where I taught about survey methods I partnered with on-campus groups at UBC who are working on a variety of projects. The students learn foundational survey research skills in the classroom and apply those skills in collaboration with a UBC unit. Each student team is assigned a UBC unit to partner with and develop a survey instrument that will allow the UBC unit to conduct the kind of research it identifies as being critical to its advancement. In the past, student teams have developed surveys for increasing the usage of the cultural assets at UBC, provided several AMS organizations with surveys to

measure student attitudes, and worked on harm reduction initiatives to address addictive behaviour among students. Students learn to work on a team, collaborate with a partner organization, and use their emerging survey research skills to prepare a field-tested survey that is subsequently made available to their partners for use.

I also did a small project, called Partners in Practice, which was not course-based and is meant for students who are particularly interested in developing their survey skills. In this we partner with a non-profit in Vancouver which needed a survey developed, and the students would work on this by developing a survey, helping in its administration, and then analysing the results. With this assignment the students gain real-world experience using the skills that they had first developed in their course.

For my 100-level students, I do not make it mandatory to do community service learning; rather, they are required to attend a discussion section where they learn how to write a research paper. Learning how to conduct research and how to present it in the form of a paper is intended to make them better students. The students also have the option of participating in a community-based learning experience where they partner with a non-profit organization and spend two hours a week working with that organization in lieu of a traditional weekly discussion. They write reflective accounts discussing what they are observing, how the organization works, who the clients are, how the organization serves the clients, and how the organization fits within the broader context of some of the topics that we are talking about in the class.

What did students share about their experience with the Practical Learning activities?

From the student evaluations it is clear that practical learning is almost universally positive. The thing that keeps me going is when I hear from students, who are a year or two out, who say that the experience in my course is “the reason why I am where I am today.” This lets me know that the practical learning experiences are transformative. I want students to have those transformative moments, which is why I include practical learning, and doing it is giving the students what I think they need to transition from university to their careers.

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

For the early students, it is these reflective writing exercises which evidence their involvement. I am able to see from these writings that they are fulfilling the expectations of the community organization, that they are tying the activities to a sociological concept that we have been talking about in class.

For the upper year students, if they are doing a presentation, like a mini conference, I usually split them into two groups. One group presents and the other observes, and then they switch roles. The students who are observing ask questions from the presenting group and evaluate their presentation skills.

Specifically, in SOCI 380, Students are regularly evaluated on their progress in developing their respective surveys, incorporating best-practices for survey design, and delivering their final survey to the UBC-unit. Throughout the course, students share their progress with their peers, who provide feedback and suggestions. Because students are working with a UBC-unit, students are also evaluated based on their level of professionalism in communication, meeting deadlines, and contributing to a team-based process. In SPCI 480, Students complete a series of ethnographic accounts, which are evaluated with the goal of developing students’ ability to write ethnographically. Additionally, students are expected to maintain a high-level of professionalism in working with their community partners, including communicating effectively and completing projects.

And then I also have the TAs who will ensure that everything is professional, checking off elements like adherence to guidelines, how the students are conducting themselves, and what kind of information they are sharing.

I feel that most of the students achieved the intended learning outcomes. Some students who are really good at classroom learning may feel uncomfortable with this format, but for the bulk of students it is a positive experience. I try to ladder it, beginning in the first year where they learn about community; every year gets more and more involved, and by the time they are done, they can have a good sense of what they want to do professionally.

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

My hope is to continue to build a ladder set of opportunities for practical learning within my department so that in the first-year students get an introduction to practical learning, and by their third and fourth year they are prepared to do deep dives into practical learning. But that requires a commitment of support from my department, and I am trying to build that culture in my department to achieve that. Incorporating more practical learning into courses needs to happen across the curriculum, so that all students have access to these opportunities. To achieve this, continued support from UBC is needed.

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

I would suggest starting in the space that you are comfortable in. Start small with having students do a portfolio or having assignments that connect them to communities. Management of all the moving parts requires a lot of practice—and a willingness to make mistakes--so try to get good support, like having TAs who understand what you are trying to do, and the support of your department head. Support is critical. Connect with the staff at UBC who can guide you through the support that UBC provides. For me, early conversations with Julie Walchli have helped me a lot in charting a map, starting at the point of figuring out how to get art students more involved with the existing resources the university already has.