

## **Practical Learning with Dr. Patrick Moore**

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

I will focus on ANTH 480, Urban Ethnographic Field School, which I co-teach with Sociology professor Kerry Greer, although there are aspects of practical learning that I use in other courses as well. A part of the course is done at the UBC Learning Exchange, which has only a limited space to have classes, so the course is capped at around 30 students. It is also necessarily small because we have to arrange for placements with the non-profit organisations, which typically take two to four students.

### **What does practical learning mean in your course?**

I probably have some resistance to the idea that there is a set of skills that are isolatable as practical learning, because some of these are skills we need as humans to function in our daily life. We tend to isolate these skills that we are learning at the university, when in fact, in daily life we always have need for very diverse skills.

People talk about ostension, that is the ability to almost read people's minds, but in an academic context that is not formally taught or thought about or you are not placed in situations where you are often using all that potential. When you are out in the real world, like we are every day, you have to use all those skills and integrate them. In this course, practical learning is about reclaiming that broad set of skills and expanding students' awareness as they deal with diverse people in the real world when placed in organizations that are serving the general public, for instance people who are food insecure, have mental health issues or have drug dependencies.

When I think about practical learning, it is ways of facilitating people becoming familiar with a wide variety of contexts in which their knowledge and personal skills as a thoughtful individual are useful and integrating that in an academic context where we think about communities, organizations, and people and writing about them.

### **Why do you incorporate Practical Learning?**

I think it is useful for students as it broadens their appreciation for very diverse skills, and helps them realize that those skills, which may not be as highly valued in the academic context, are extremely valuable for them and for communities. The kind of writing that students do, ethnographic writing with vivid descriptions, and thinking about things very carefully and positioning themselves thoughtfully in their work, is a powerful form of thinking and writing. I think the experience of working with community is useful for them, as they see themselves as being able to make substantial contributions to organizations. This work draws on the skills that students have and they make an important contribution through their work. It also provides the community organizations with a positive link with UBC and UBC's resources, like accessing funding through community engagement projects. Our students are not just playing around; they get out there and do stuff, and it is beneficial on both sides, for students and the organizations.

## **How did it work?**

I can tell you about some of the ways in the Urban Ethnographic Field School that the students are working on a full range of life skills. In ANTH 480, there are two main parts- in one part, in the mornings from Monday to Thursday, the students do coursework where we discuss readings and ideas that they were working on, and about the placements- how they are going to fit in and make a contribution at the organization. One of the things we always reflect on in class is how the organizations are different, they come from different places and have different mandates. Some organizations have quite definite structure, like some of the established neighborhood houses, and some others have a very loose structure, like the Urban Farm. To work with these organisations, you have to know how they function--programs roles—and where you will fit in with what they already do. We are also talking about the experiences of people doing ethnographies all over the world, whether it is with peasants in France, or fish markets in Japan, or wherever. Students see what other people have done and how they write and what kind of techniques they do and how they take field notes.

The rest of the time, students are placed with various front-line organizations that are working with community. I think that when students have to work at their placements, that is when they learn more about the real-world. The front-line organisations are all non-profit groups, with focus on immigrant services, food and food security, and such. In the second part of their work, students are working on whatever those organizations need them to do and it is highly integrated with the skills that you would use in service-oriented areas.

The students orient themselves into an organisation, working out their roles and how they can contribute to the organisation, learning about community, studying how the institutions are organised and their priorities, and so on. They take field notes during their work with these organisations, and being a participant in the organisations' activities they also do participant observation. They are working on a different style of writing than they would use in their university papers which are more analytical; this is based on showing through your writing what is going on and capturing what the people are like. They do interviews with people and try to create a story about a place, or institution through vivid descriptions that are organized to give an overall impression. They create an argument, and build a story, which is ethnographic and richly descriptive so that you get knowledge about the places.

They learn about the differences in operations of the organizations. For instance, Urban Farm, for which Atari is the ostensible coordinating organization this year, is largely community-based with the community members having a direct role in decision making- what is to be grown, how the watering system will be, the financials, and all such things. One of our placements this year is at the UBC Learning Exchange itself, which is UBC's arm based in the Vancouver Downtown Eastside.

I think what we are encouraging students to do is practical learning in the sense that you have to find your way through an organization and contribute in whatever ways are significant for them. This could draw on any of their skills, from academic contexts like survey skills, or real-world skills that people need, such as the skills required to put up an irrigation system in an urban farm. They have the practical aspects, but partly it is building towards this wider knowledge of what useful contribution you can make, wherever

you find yourself. In the context of this field school, you have to use all of your understandings to ground yourself and think about what you are going to do in these organizations, about your positionality and its purpose, about the wider picture. Everyone has these skills, but in an academic context, some of those are not foregrounded as much.

### **What activities did the students do to develop Practical Learning skills?**

They are going and working with front line organizations and individuals who use those services. Every student has to do a 1-hour interview with one person, who is usually somebody from the organization that they are placed with, who has an understanding of the organisation and what it is trying to do. Beyond that, there is an ethnographic field work where they do four ethnographic writing assignments during this six-week course. They write vivid descriptions, carry out interviews through interview transcripts, put together a whole description that incorporates their experiences, and this process pushes them to have the rich experiences in their placements that they can draw upon to do that writing. To a certain extent, ethnographic writing is a practical skill itself; if you are good at it, you could be a journalist, or do professional writing in Anthropology, or Sociology. But it does more than just develop the writing skill: it forces you to have those experiences and think about things quite deeply and reflectively. Your experiences are important practical skills, in my opinion, which would make you better at whatever job you eventually have. You will have more dedication to that work and to working with other people, and you will be more effective.

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

I think the amount of work is stressful and demanding with enormous reading and doing half day in class and all the work with the organisations. In spite of so much to be done in a six-week period, students are well prepared, support each other, and write some amazing assignments. The students have a one-page reflection at the end of each ethnography, and they generally are wildly enthusiastic about the whole experience.

They always give us these over-the-top cards at the end of the course. They seem to deeply appreciate having knowledge and experience of different people in a context where it is not fearful for them. There are students, some of our best, who come from other departments that find the overall experience important for them as it is different from a lot of things that they would do in their other courses.

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

We have diverse assignments. There are these four ethnographies- one about the community that they are working in, one about the institution, one about the program, and one that synthesizes everything. The last one is longer but recycles some of the previous materials.

In addition, at the end, there is an event where all the community partners are invited, and students demonstrate in a practical way the things that they have learned about. These are not academic or PowerPoint presentations, but some practical displays that would help you understand about the work that an organization is doing. Like students who worked with Food Stash Foundation, which collects surplus

food from grocery stores and recycles it, had people doing food sorting exercises. They would give you a description of the components that have to go in the food boxes that are going to certain people or organizations, and you would have to pick it out from the food that they had stacked. For the Urban Farm, the students did a Jeopardy- like trivia, in which three groups- Sociology students, Anthropology students, and community group members- competed to identify plants. For each organization, groups of students came up with different interactive activities that would highlight what their organization is all about.

They sometimes surprise me how much they learn and go beyond. You get to a certain point where you are thinking these students are probably doing better than I could have done when I was at their stage, which is also due to these students getting better opportunities.

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

One of the things that I always worry about, that is always a challenge to deal with, and to which I do not have the total solution is the Downtown Eastside itself. There are dangers associated with that community, and I do not like to expose students to danger. We do minimize danger as much as we can, but there are things that happen there which are not everyday events in most of suburban contexts in Vancouver. I do not exaggerate certain stereotypes, but at the same time, I want to stay realistic and keep students safe. So, I could have students do more of their placements in other areas.

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

I think one thing that they can do is see who is already doing that kind of work and from talking to other professors get ideas and ways of making it workable. Maybe even have an opportunity to co-teach where they work with somebody who has been doing it for a while and then being experienced that way.

I would just encourage people to do that. It is not the easiest road to academic success, and is time consuming, but I think it is rewarding at the same time. It is extremely valuable for students and for the communities, but you have to have your balance right— what is valued by the academy and disciplines, and still meets student needs.