Online Community Engagement – Best Practices and Key Considerations
June 2020

Overview

A background review was completed to better understand the best practices, challenges and key considerations for courses facilitating community engagement courses online, or extreme e-learning. The review consisted of a scan of existing literature, articles and other post-secondary institutions in Canada and beyond. This document provides a short summary of the key findings. For additional support regarding adapting community engaged learning activities for online instruction, please contact the Office of Community Engagement directly.

Online Integration of Community-Engaged Facilitation and Learning

Key Challenges	Best Practices and Implementation Tips
Online community-engaged courses can require additional time and effort from the instructor.	• Ensure the project or service students are completing are related to learning objectives • Incorporate student reflection • Ask for student input and feedback on how the course is going and make adjustments, if possible. Do the same for community partners, if applicable. • Post static content for students to read and/or watch in their own time.
Poorly designed integration, likely a result of being unfamiliar with best practices for one or more of the component pedagogies.	• Connect with campus experts on the component pedagogies (i.e. MacPherson Institute, Office of Community Engagement, etc.)
Lack of student interaction among students, community partners and/or instructors.	• Require group work, real-time virtual sessions with the community partner (if applicable) and break-out sessions. • Use group spaces on the course management system to encourage dialogue and reflection. • Ensure community partners are familiar and comfortable working with technology. • Allow opportunities for reflection. • Provide timely, constructive, personalized feedback • Record and archive synchronous events for students to view later.
Students may experience a lack of agency if they are not engaging directly with the community and/or partner.	• Introduce students to the purpose of community engagement (specifically e-service learning). • Make explicit connections between the service-learning project and course learning goals, reflection, appropriate time commitment, faculty commitment, student input, discussion of the project impact, and feedback loops.

Key Challenges	Best Practices and Implementation Tips
Issues with technology.	- Run trials before facilitation. - Set clear statements of expectations related to technical skills and etiquette for all types of communication. - Provide links to resources for technical support and/or training for instructors, students, and community partners, if applicable. - Use accessible technologies and facilitation tactics. - Have a back-up plan if the technology fails.
Risk of less fluid relationships.	- Develop clear expectations with community partners and discuss the best ways for them to connect to you and the course. - Allow community partner access to the course shell. - Integrate the partner to real-time sessions, if possible. - Connect with the Office of Community Engagement for support.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Considerations

Tips to adopting a mindset for equity, inclusion and diversity are summarized below:

- **Practice Equity Awareness** – starting from a place of empathy to meet students where they are at i.e. home is not necessarily a safe space, they may not have the access to stable internet/reliable technology, and studying may take a back seat to fears about precarious employment, paying rent, affording food, etc.
- **Online Inclusion** – Removing barriers to participant and try to avoid miscommunication i.e. using closed captioning, offer to use multiple avenues of communication, and interrogate your evaluation methods: do you offer multiple means to meet objectives or reward privilege in your assessments?
- **Serving Diverse Populations** - Flexible and frequent engagement, for shorter amounts of time, in smaller groups is the recipe for success when it comes to serving marginalized communities. i.e. offer virtual office hours outside of traditional operating time, be proactive to focus on at-risk groups with extra check-ins to spot early warning signs and initiate live, synchronous interactions between students outside of coursework to promote connectedness.

Additional considerations should be made regarding accessibility of course content.

Works Cited

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