

Proceedings of the 2017 Atlantic Universities' Teaching Showcase

Volume 21 | Pages 83–89 | <https://ojs.library.dal.ca/auts/index>

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*Association of Atlantic Universities/
Association des universités de l'atlantique
Editor-in-Chief: Donovan Plumb
www.atlanticuniversities.ca*

*Volume 21 | Pages 83–89
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Abstract

At the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), experiential learning is a core aspect of the Environmental Studies program. One way that experiential learning is incorporated into the program is through a third year required course for Bachelor of Environmental Studies majors, Environmental Studies Internship. While a typical lecture course has 36 hours of instructional time, in this course students spend 18 hours in class and the remaining 18 course hours, plus an additional 12 volunteer hours, in an internship placement. This results in a total of 30 hours of “hands on” learning in the environmental field over the course of the semester. Over the past eight years, students have worked with federal, provincial, and municipal governments, local non-governmental organizations, and a private consulting company, where they have been provided with diverse opportunities to develop different skills. This has been a very successful collaboration which has benefited both students and the community partners. Key to its success has been the preparation prior to the beginning of the internship, and the building and maintenance of relationships throughout. The learning in the student internship placements is complemented by readings and in-class lectures and discussion. Weekly on-line reflections also focus on student integration of the concepts learned in class with their internship experiences. Through collaboration with the UPEI Career Office, students gain skills that help them reflect on and prepare for future careers in the environmental field.

Keywords

experiential learning; hands-on learning; environment; internship; service-learning; Environmental Studies

Introduction

In his book *Earth in Mind*, David Orr (2004) states that in order to address the complex environmental issues of our time, we need to develop an ecologically literate society with the capacity to understand the ecological context in which humans live, recognize limits, and design sustainable systems. This involves not only the invention of new technologies but also the development of an ethical view of the world. The development of such "sustainability literacy," however, requires a form of learning that goes beyond learning facts. It requires active learning involving self-reflection, self-directed enquiry, learning by doing, engagement with real life problems and issues, and learning within communities (Stibbe, 2009).

Experiential learning can broaden and deepen the intellectual content of undergraduate instruction by: integrating theory and practice; increasing student motivation to engage in academic work through the experience of applying knowledge; encouraging students to develop their skills as independent scholars and researchers; and contributing to students' sense of civic and social responsibility (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). In many disciplines, well-structured experiential education has had positive academic, cognitive, attitudinal, career and personal effects on students (Gross Davis, 2009). At the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), experiential learning is a core aspect of the Environmental Studies program. One way that experiential learning is incorporated into the Bachelor of Environmental Studies (BES) degree is through a third year required course, Environmental Studies Internship, which is taught by the author. This report provides an overview of how the course is structured within the context of the learning objectives of the BES. It highlights two essential aspects of its success, namely preparation prior to the beginning of the internship, and the building and maintenance of relationships.

Environmental Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island

The objective of the BES program at UPEI is to equip students as global citizens with the tools to understand the environmental connections across academic fields, critically analyze complex environmental issues, and lead the way in innovation toward sustainable solutions. Environmental issues do not respect traditional academic boundaries and require scientific, technical, human,

and social perspectives to address them. This interdisciplinary liberal arts and science program, therefore, strives to provide students with the opportunity to integrate knowledge across Faculties of Arts, Science, and Business. In the classroom, in the field, and in the community, the BES challenges students to explore how they can make a positive impact toward sustainability in their personal lives, communities, and globally.

As part of the 120 credit hours required for the BES degree, students take 14 Environmental Studies courses, of which five are core courses. Two of these courses, in the third and fourth year, are structured specifically to provide experiential learning opportunities for students. Besides Environmental Studies courses, students are required to take courses in the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and business. When graduating with the BES, students will have knowledge of the bio-physical environment and an understanding of the complexity of its interconnectedness with human experience. The program emphasizes the ability to think critically and holistically about environmental issues and to recognize their moral, ethical, cultural, and historical dimensions. Furthermore, students should have the ability to examine environmental issues systematically and recognize the need to integrate knowledge, and approach problem solving from social, economic, and ecological perspectives. Through their courses and experiential learning activities, students develop their research skills, oral and written communication skills, leadership ability, and organizational and team-building skills. Student internships in the environmental field provide a valuable opportunity to integrate these learning objectives.

Environmental Studies Internship

“Environmental Studies Internship” is a third year required course for BES majors at UPEI. It is offered during one semester each year and counts as three credit hours towards a student’s degree. Students doing the minor in Environmental Studies and students studying towards other degrees are also able to take the course. The course evolved from a previous course entitled “Integrating Environmental Theory and Practice,” but maintains the same focus of providing students with an opportunity for “hands-on” learning with community partners working in the environmental field. While a typical lecture course at UPEI has 36 hours of instructional time, in this course students spend 18 hours in class and the remaining 18 hours of course time in their internship placement. Combined with a required 12 volunteer hours, students have the opportunity for a total of 30 hours of hands-on learning in the environmental field over the course of the semester.

Prior to the beginning of the semester, the professor contacts various Prince Edward Island (PEI) government departments that work in the environmental field, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS), and environmentally-oriented businesses to find out if

they are interested in hosting an Environmental Studies intern. If they are, they submit one or two ideas about the activities that a student might be engaged in during the internship placement. At the beginning of the semester, students are provided with a list of community partners who are willing to host a student intern and the types of activities they might engage in during their placement. To assign placements, students indicate to the professor their top three choices for community partners. As stated in the course syllabus, the professor tries to match students with their preferred community partner, but in the end the professor makes the final judgement. Typically, a community partner has hosted only one student per semester.

Once a student is matched with a community partner, the student is required to contact them and set up a meeting. Prior to the meeting, students are encouraged to reflect on three to five major goals that they hope to achieve as part of their internship experience. When meeting with the community partner, they must discuss their goals and also gain an understanding of the community partner's expectations. They also finalize the types of activities they will be engaged in for their internship. Based on this discussion, each student submits a learning contract to the professor in which they outline their goals and describe the activities that they will be involved in during their internship period. The learning contract ensures that everyone—students, community partners, and the professor—knows the plans for the internship.

The class meets for the first five classes and the last five classes of the semester. Once students begin their internships, the class also meets every two weeks so that students can discuss their experiences with each other. Readings and in-class lectures and discussions focus on topics relevant to the subject of environmental studies and their internships. In preparation for their internships, one class is devoted to a discussion of professional ethics using scenarios that are typical to such co-op or student internship placements. A counsellor from the UPEI Career Office also gives a guest lecture prior to the start of their internships on the topic of "Career Development: Making the Most of Your Internship Experience." The career development aspect of the course is further advanced through a workshop on resumes and cover letters later in the semester. A career-oriented ePortfolio is included as a major assignment. Weekly on-line reflections focus on student integration of the concepts learned in class with their internship experiences.

Over the past eight years, students have worked with federal, provincial and municipal governments, local ENGOs, UPEI, and a private consulting company, where they have been provided with diverse opportunities for hands on learning. Such opportunities have included the creation and implementation of environmental educational programs, event planning, data analysis, grant writing, and environmental field work. Often these tasks are those that the community partner would like to do, but does not have the time or resources to complete themselves. This is particularly

true for the ENGOs as they are often volunteer-driven and may have only one part-time employee. Also, PEI government environment departments often have limited staff and so the student interns are able to make valuable contributions to their mandate.

Internships are structured differently depending on the situation, but the 30 hours must be completed before the end of the semester. Some students work for a couple of hours each week in the community partner's office on their assigned tasks, while others go into the field to do data collection with the community partner, but most work independently on the expected activities and check in occasionally via email, phone, or in person with their community partner. The professor is available for the community partner to contact her at any time, but she formally contacts each one mid-semester to see how things are going and take corrective action, if needed. At the end of the semester, the community partners are asked to complete a form in which they evaluate the student based on their personal and professional qualities. These feedback forms are used to develop a grade for the internship portion of the course. These forms are not given to students but the content is shared generally in order to help them further develop both personally and professionally.

Reflections on success

The course has worked successfully over the past eight years as students have had valuable experiences working in the environmental field. This internship has helped them gain a better understanding, not only of diverse environmental careers, but also of themselves. It provides them with an experience that informs their future studies and career direction. Community partners have also benefited from the students' knowledge and enthusiasm. There have been very few incidents when students have not fulfilled their commitment, and when that has happened the community partners have been very understanding. Those who have participated are always willing to host another student in the future.

This success can be attributed to two factors, namely, preparation prior to the beginning of the internship, and the building and maintenance of relationships. The preparation includes the community partner and the students. When contacting a potential community partner, the professor explains in detail how the course works and the level of involvement and responsibility of the community partner. She sends them the evaluation form that they will be expected to complete at the end and addresses any questions or concerns that they have. The learning contract is a key part of the preparation for students as it requires them to reflect on what they want to achieve through their internship. Discussing their goals in person with the community partner and understanding the community partner's expectations ensures that everyone knows the plans for the internship. Discussing professional ethics prior to beginning the internships helps students develop in their

knowledge of how to conduct themselves in a professional situation. The contribution of the UPEI Career Counsellor also helps students to reflect on how they can maximize their learning during their internships.

Building and maintaining relationships is another key to the course's success. The professor established relationships with community partners eight years ago when she started teaching the course. She adds some new community partners each year and maintains the relationships with those who have hosted students in the past. This is done through providing clear information, helping to address any concerns, and expressing appreciation for the community partner's willingness to host a student. Formally checking in with the community partners during the semester is important in maintaining open lines of communication. Community partners are formally thanked with a note of appreciation from the professor at the end of the semester. The learning contract provides a basis for a good relationship between the student and the community partners by ensuring that both parties understand what is expected for the internship. Weekly reflections and bi-weekly class meetings help the professor to maintain contact with the students. The weekly reflection gives the professor insight into the student perspective on the internship. The bi-weekly class meetings are an opportunity for the students to share together and discuss different aspects of their internships and for the professor to provide guidance. This communication is important in ensuring that the internships go well and are a valuable part of students' education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many community partners in Prince Edward Island who provide experiential learning opportunities for students. Thank you to Emily VanInderstine, a fourth year BES student, who provided a student perspective in the oral presentation at the Atlantic Universities Teaching Showcase in October 2017.

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