UEval: Bringing Community-Based Experiential Learning to the Evaluation Classroom

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Abstract: *This practice note describes the unique features of, and lessons learned from, UEval, an innovative one-week “evaluation institute” at the Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta. This initiative responds to an identified community and university need to provide contextual and socially relevant evaluation-focused educational opportunities to learners across disciplines and sectors. UEval is guided by principles of participatory and experiential learning and brings together undergraduates, graduates, and community professionals as co-learners for a mutually beneficial and sustainable educational experience. During the week, learners explore and apply evaluation theory through project-based curricula and develop evaluative responses to community-informed issues.*

Keywords: *evaluation capacity building, evaluation education*

Résumé : *Cette note sur la pratique décrit les caractéristiques uniques et les leçons tirées d’UEval, un « Institut d’évaluation » novateur d’une semaine, de la Faculty of Extension de l’Université de l’Alberta. Cette initiative répond à un besoin noté au sein de la communauté et de l’université, soit d’offrir des occasions d’apprentissage axées sur l’évaluation et pertinentes d’un point de vue social et contextuel, à des apprenantes et apprenants de divers secteurs et disciplines. L’UEval a été orienté par des principes d’apprentissage participatif et expérientiel et regroupe des étudiantes et étudiants de tous les cycles ainsi que des professionnels de la communauté, dans*

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le cadre d'une expérience pédagogique durable et mutuellement bénéfique. Au cours de la semaine, les apprenantes et apprenants explorent et appliquent la théorie de l'évaluation par l'intermédiaire d'un curriculum fondé sur des projets et élaborent des réponses d'évaluation à des questions d'ordre communautaire.

Mots clés : *amélioration de la capacité d'évaluation, formation en évaluation*

Increasing pressures on community-based organizations to generate evidence of accountability and impact parallel a rising demand for evaluation education. Universities have a pivotal role in training and building the capacity of both working professionals and students entering the workforce to respond to society's evaluative needs (McShane et al., 2015). In Canada, there is a lack of evaluation-focused higher-level education (Hunter & McDavid, 2018) that equips students with practical and contextual evaluation knowledge and skills (Gokiart et al., 2017). This is problematic; evaluation is used extensively across sectors to measure program and policy effectiveness, and it is in great demand by government, non-profits, and businesses.

This practice note describes UEval, an innovative, one-week evaluation institute at the University of Alberta that bridges evaluation theory and practice to fill a community and university evaluation gap by bringing stakeholders together around community-based experiential learning. In addition to course learnings, UEval serves to build sustainable evaluation capacity through a shared learning space for undergraduate, graduate, and community learners. Through community-informed case-based learning and learner co-creation of evaluation plans, UEval supports community stakeholders by providing them with a tangible evaluation resource.

EVALUATOR TRAINING

Evaluator training can increase evaluation capacity and prepare competent practitioners (Gullickson et al., 2019; Johnson, 2018; LaVelle, 2019). UEval was created to foster competency gains through its competency-based curriculum and experiential, co-learning teaching model. Integrating these pedagogical approaches, UEval aims to build reciprocally beneficial evaluation capacity within the university and the community. Professional competency gains can also be explained as evaluation capacity building (ECB), or gains in knowledge, skills, and attitude on how to conduct and use evaluations (Labin, 2014; Preskill & Boyle, 2008; Rogers et al., 2019). Gokiart et al. (2017) identified needs for evaluation capacity at both individual and organizational levels within the social sector—specifically in the form of innovative learning opportunities to cultivate contextual evaluation knowledge and skills. Although recent literature provides examples of learning opportunities with experiential, co-learning teaching models, similar to UEval (Bakken et al., 2014; Mignone et al., 2018; Suiter et al., 2016), few studies describe competency-based course-models (Poth et al., 2020). Competency gains in practical and contextual domains prepare evaluators for effective professional

practice in community contexts (Gokiert et al., 2017). While existing training models equip learners with technical knowledge, many programs are not designed to nurture the knowledge, skills, and dispositions with which learners can apply evaluation theory in practice (Davis & MacKay, 2014; Dewey et al., 2008; Galport & Azzam, 2017; Johnson, 2018).

Hands-on, experiential teaching and co-learning enhance learner engagement in evaluation training (Boyce & McGowan, 2019; Darabi, 2002; Kaye-Tzadok & Spiro, 2016; Oliver et al., 2008). Students learn course concepts through problem solving with applied contexts and real-life cases (Oliver et al., 2008; Suiter et al., 2016). The instructor's role becomes that of facilitator and fellow co-creator (Bhola, 1998). Problem-focused learning and facilitation empower students to think through their decisions, while encouraging them to seek the instructor's guidance or expertise when needed (Oliver et al., 2008). The result is a more active and reflective role of learners (Darabi, 2002; Suiter et al., 2016).

UEval's constructivist pedagogy informs its experiential, co-learning teaching model, allowing peers to learn from and with one another, with the goal of constructing new knowledge and applying it to their context (Bhola, 1998; Buckley et al., 2015). Co-learning emphasizes an egalitarian learning partnership that equally values the input of all participants (Bhola, 1998; Farnsworth et al., 2016). The co-learning process enhances learning because it relies on the collective responsibility of learners in knowledge co-construction and application (Bhola, 1998; Buckley et al., 2015) as "interdependent co-learners and co-investigators" (Suiter et al., 2016, p. 553). This practice note outlines how UEval's constructivist pedagogy informs its co-created curriculum and addresses the call for further research about the significance of pedagogy in informing evaluator education (LaVelle, 2020).

UEval BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Prior to the genesis of UEval, several of the authors conducted an evaluation capacity needs assessment in Alberta (Tink et al., 2017), finding that universities have a pivotal role in increasing the evaluation capacity of the health and social sector by providing evaluation-based expertise, brokering student capacity through practicums, and providing education for university students (McDavid & Devine, 2009; McShane et al., 2015). Students are eager to build new skills and are seeking community-based research, evaluation, and learning opportunities (Gokiert et al., 2017; Mignone et al., 2018). They recognize the need to equip themselves with contextual knowledge and skills to navigate a social sector with complex challenges (Armitage & Levac, 2015; Porter et al., 2018).

Responding to these findings, we formed a partnership among faculty, students, funders, and community stakeholders who recognized the need to bridge gaps in community and university evaluation. We received funding through a University of Alberta Teaching and Learning Enhancement Grant to develop and pilot a one-week evaluation institute in spring 2019. We formed a Learning Advisory Committee (LAC) with stakeholders able to represent UEval's diverse learner needs and guide its development. LAC representation, drawn from the

partnership, included campus faculty (Public Health, Pharmacy, Community Service Learning, Education, Human Ecology, Extension), a municipal government body (City of Edmonton), two community funders (United Way of the Capital Region, Edmonton Community Foundation), and the Alberta/Northwest Territories chapter of the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES).

To learn from a similar experiential, constructivist model of teaching and learning, Gokiart and three students (two graduate and one undergraduate) participated in the Summer Institute in Program Evaluation at the University of Manitoba (Mignone et al., 2018). As learners, facilitators, lecturers, and observers, they explored the Institute's evaluation education model, *real-life evaluation plans in a one-room school*, and determined its feasibility and application within the Alberta context. UEval was designed as a case-based experiential, co-learning space for evaluation training. From June 3–7, 2019, UEval was piloted as a three-credit undergraduate, graduate, and non-credit continuing and professional education course. Co-instructed by authors Gokiart and Daniels, the course engaged 52 learners from across seven faculties, 15 disciplines, and 13 community-based organizations. Prior to the one week of in-class sessions, learners completed four online modules covering the fundamentals of evaluation and providing a foundational understanding of evaluation language and theory. During the in-class sessions, learners explored and applied evaluation theory through case-based curricula. The institute instruction involved a mix of didactic lectures alongside experiential activities in the mornings and facilitated case-study group work in the afternoons (see Figure 1). Seven local community case studies informed the case-study group work and provided learners the opportunity to develop tailored evaluation plans with case-study key informants. Below, we elaborate on four key elements of UEval's instructional model that were critical to its development and delivery.

Co-constructed curriculum

As UEval was intended to foster university and community-engaged evaluative learning, the LAC was tasked with UEval's development, and members are included here as authors. We met monthly to develop course objectives and online and in-class curricula, and to select relevant community case studies for the week of the institute. We engaged graduate students as research and teaching assistants to support the LAC and co-instructors (Gokiart and Daniels) in UEval's development and implementation, and we made every effort to construct the curriculum with CES competencies (2018) in mind, including CES representatives on the advisory committee, and choosing pre-/post-course assessments that included these competencies. We received ethics approval from the University of Alberta ethics board to study the development and pilot delivery of UEval.

Blended and experiential learning

Following a "flipped" blended delivery approach, UEval provided online instruction two weeks prior to the in-class sessions. Learners accessed online instruction

UEval: Institute at a Glance

Course Objectives By the completion of the course, learners will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Articulate the basic principles of evaluation in the community context Apply appropriate evaluation designs to different evaluation purposes in a community context Engage stakeholders when creating or co-creating an evaluation plan in a community context Formulate and present an evaluation framework within a community context Recognize critical ethical issues when planning an evaluation in a community context 			
Pre-Institute Learning Modules (via eClass)			
	May 20 – June 2, 2019	Module 2: Developing an Evaluation Plan	Module 3: Collecting Data for Evaluation
	Module 1: Introduction to Evaluation		Module 4: Using Evaluative Data & Mobilizing Knowledge
Classroom Learning (Faculty of Extension)			
	June 3 – June 7, 2019	Do	Use
	Plan	Do	Share
	(1) Engaging stakeholders & vulnerable populations (2) Evaluation purpose, approach, and type (3) Ethics	(1) Evaluation methods (2) Data collection (3) Ethics	(1) Knowledge mobilization (2) Using evaluative data (3) Ethics
	Day 1: Stakeholder engagement Lecture & Activities	Day 2: Evaluation process Lecture & Activities	Day 3: Methods & Data collection Lecture & Activities
8:30am–12pm	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:1pm	Activity & Introduction to case studies	Activity & Group work on case studies	Group work & Presentations
1-4:30pm	Public keynote event on evaluation		Lunch
5-7pm			Presentations & Evaluation
Assignments due by 4pm on Friday, June 28 th , 2019			

Figure 1. UEval Institute at a glance

through e-class, a Moodle learning service, which offered a downloadable library of resources to inform class assignments or practice, along with interactive modules. Online modules were hosted on ISeazy, a web-based platform, and were accessible any time during the two weeks. Our goal was to provide content to build technical and foundational evaluation knowledge. As one learner shared, “[the modules] created somewhat of a level ‘playing field’ for the practical in-class work, which I thought was fantastic!” Upon completing each module, learners could test their newly acquired knowledge through quizzes and engage with peers in discussion forums.

UEval’s blended and condensed format is innovative in offering a flexible learning structure that accommodates busy community partners and university students. Equally, UEval’s model of experiential, co-learning is unique; rather than students going into the community for practicums or community service-learning, UEval brings the community to the classroom. UEval engaged community members as learners, and many brought cases from their organizations for co-learning and co-creation alongside students. In the mornings, the co-instructors delivered lectures complementing the pre-institute online modules and prepared learners for their case-study activities. Experiential learning exercises followed; in pre-assigned groups, students co-constructed knowledge, sharing ideas of how lecture content applied to a local, multi-stakeholder illustrative case study used throughout the week.

Case-study group work in the afternoons allowed learners to collaboratively test and apply what they had learned. Students and community partners explored and co-created evaluation plans for seven different community-based case studies. Each learner was pre-assigned to a group based on the relevance of their academic or professional background to the topic, and groups included about eight participants—learners, key informant(s), and a facilitator. To help commence discussion, each group received a two-page handout detailing program history, objective(s), and evaluation need/rationale. A learners’ handbook included instructions, activities, and questions to guide discussions and ensure that key evaluation plan elements were addressed. At week’s end, each group presented an evaluation framework, with guests invited from the community. Facilitators were integral to the case-study group work, encouraging equitable participation, mediating interpersonal conflicts, and providing evaluation mentorship. They were selected on merits of teaching or facilitating experience, as well as working knowledge of evaluation concepts. All facilitators participated in a one-day training workshop to discuss the case-study documents, student handbook, protocols for team development, conflict resolution, and learner expectations.

Interdisciplinary and intersectoral learners

Fifty-two learners participated in UEval: 17 community learners, 31 university students, and four auditors. To recruit learners, weekly advertisements for prospective students and community partners were placed in diverse media, including university newsletters, listservs, and newsletters of local community organizations, and through the wider professional community, such as the CES.

We also employed social media posts and a short video on university TV monitors. Students included four undergraduate and 27 graduate students, the majority of whom were Master's level, from across seven faculties and 15 disciplines on campus. Community learners represented local community-based organizations from the public and private sectors, and many participated with the dual role of learner and key informant to a case study.

Case study topics varied widely and included campus food security, early literacy, early childhood development, public washrooms, and care of seniors. A call for submissions was circulated through multiple intersectoral social network and media platforms. Interested organizations submitted an online interest form and were expected to send a key informant to participate, should their case study be accepted, to answer specific questions about the case's context.

UEval learning evidence

UEval learners completed several graded assessments, and assignments to promote dialogue and reflection were woven into the course. Survey results from the beginning and end of the course indicated increased CES competency gains. Learners also completed individual final reflections on the learning experience, including CES competencies, major course learnings, and the group process. Many concluded that they became cognizant of how little they knew about evaluation. As one learner stated, "until hearing the importance of these competencies in the lectures and group work, I didn't realize there was a lot I still needed to learn." Learners identified diversity as an opportunity for them to garner alternate/ holistic perspectives from their intersectoral and interdisciplinary peers:

In learning from individuals in different fields, we come to better see the interconnectedness of issues and the impacts on systems and communities as a whole, rather than in isolation. Through engaging with colleagues from a variety of sectors, it opens up new ways of analyzing complex problems and the possibility for solutions to these complex problems. The opportunity to connect and learn from each other from our various positions . . . was an invaluable part of this course.

On the institute's last day, each case study group gave a 20-minute presentation of its evaluation plan. A small grade weight was allotted to anonymized peer assessments of these presentations. The course culminated in the final evaluation plan. Learners were allowed to modify the collective work of their case-study group when writing the plan individually or in smaller groups. In addition to serving as an assessment tool, the final plan was a valuable product for the community partners and organizations that planned to conduct evaluations in the near future. These evaluation plans, with data-collection methods and schedules, knowledge translation strategies, and helpful resources for implementation, constituted a significant starting place for organizations to begin their own evaluations.

The diversity of learners and worldviews contributed to the knowledge gained during training and shaped how students engaged in co-learning and consensus building. Co-construction of the final evaluation framework included the challenging task of arriving at consensus with peers and the key informant. In contrast

to case-based evaluation courses where learners have time to process information about the program after meeting the stakeholder, UEval learners had both the benefit and challenge of conversing with the key informant in class and quickly making decisions. Discussions and brainstorming—core activities of consensus building—required that learners reconcile and negotiate diverse ideas while remaining respectful.

REFLECTION

We reflect on our learnings, and share UEval's pedagogy, strengths and challenges, with the hope that other educators may be able to implement similar initiatives. With anticipated future deliveries of UEval, reflection is also important for improving the course.

Co-constructed curriculum

The LAC's community–university engaged process for course development ensured that the curriculum was relevant across different disciplines and sectors, and the collaboration of diverse stakeholders ensured that the course's content aligned with its constructivist pedagogy. UEval will continue to include a co-creation process: among LAC stakeholders for course content, and among learners during the institute. In a move that addressed the LAC concern that the course be beneficial and accessible to community organizations and learners, funding opportunities were provided to offset tuition costs.

Blended and experiential co-learning

The goal of the pre-institute online learning was to introduce foundational evaluation concepts, allowing more classroom time for instruction, experiential learning, and co-creation. We directed the online module content to learners from a variety of academic backgrounds and exposure levels to evaluation. Some learners who had not recently been in school or who had not taken a methods course found the materials more challenging and took longer than the anticipated one hour to complete each module. Learners also expected that instructors would reiterate module content during the institute. Conversely, instructors added depth to the online modules through a series of experiential activities in class and the opportunity to participate in the real-life case study. In future institutes we plan to reiterate some module content—without reproducing it—before starting the experiential exercises.

The modules also provided a virtual space for an online community of practice. Learners expected instructors to moderate the online forum discussions, which was not feasible. To address this, we will host live sessions with instructors, providing needed instructional feedback for learners.

Though not without its problems, the blended learning did enable us to offer the institute with just one week of in-class time, making it accessible for learners who cannot afford a longer time commitment.

The case-study team activities served as a microcosm of a complex community context and offered a significant opportunity to see evaluation unfold in real life. As the case-based learning required team interactions and consensus building with strangers of varying experiences and motivations for taking the course, it created challenging interpersonal dynamics. Facilitators needed to appreciate the intricate nature of the activity and resolve interpersonal challenges and conflicts while guiding group collaboration. Though facilitators had subject-matter expertise in evaluation, their main role was to navigate group dynamics and keep the teams moving forward.

Future training will equip facilitators with scripted statements about respecting group process in group decision making, and we will encourage them to communicate explicitly about their role as guides to, and co-creators of, the case-study team, rather than as subject-matter experts. In a constructivist-informed classroom, knowledge co-creation is the responsibility of everyone: learners, facilitators, and key informants. Facilitators do need to know when to interject to prevent disengagement, power dynamics, or inactivity among learners and the key informant. Lastly, introducing the case-study group to one another and to the key informant prior to class time can build camaraderie and help prevent interpersonal struggles.

Intersectoral and interdisciplinary teaching and learning

In alignment with its constructivist pedagogy and addressing the needs of diverse learners, UEval departed from the “sage-on-the-stage” instructor model to allow students to learn from two co-instructors, five facilitators, a CES representative, and four guest speakers. Students reported this diversity of expertise and teaching styles as a course highlight. UEval enrollment fostered constructivist ways of learning—learning from *and* with each other. Evaluation skill levels varied highly, and the intersectoral community partners represented a wide variety of not-for-profit and public sectors. This is crucial, since varied skills, experiences, and perspectives are needed for meaningful group discussions and learning experiences, and it was made possible by the absence of a course prerequisite. This also meant that among the large number of learners were some who possessed minimal or no prior knowledge of evaluation; this might have rendered co-learning daunting for individuals and teammates. In the future, reducing the number of students may help address this.

Alongside co-learning, some students engaged in professional networking, sharing contacts for future student volunteering, practicums, and/or thesis projects.

UEval learning evidence

Learner assessments provided ample opportunity for individual and group reflection. Final presentations enabled learners to demonstrate their new evaluative competencies to colleagues, facilitators, and instructors. Peer assessments allowed learners to reflect on the work they had co-created and gave them a collectivist, constructivist mindset. All learners completed the pre- and post-CES

competencies questionnaires, which provided an opportunity to reflect on how their course learnings related to CES competencies. The individual reflection assignment required learners to discuss two altered competencies. While some learners talked about gains, especially in technical and interpersonal domains, many reflected on unanticipated decreases in competency. This was a function of recognizing that they had initially overstated their competencies and now had a more realistic view, reflecting a deeper appreciation for the nuances of evaluation. The reflection also asked students to comment on their key learnings and experiences in the group process.

UEval also provided the opportunity for self-directed learning and group work, with students given two weeks after the institute to reflect on whether and how to revisit their group's plan as they prepared their final assignments. This assessment also benefited the community partners, as they received a few versions of the final plan with ample and relevant information.

A final, significant legacy of UEval is learner participation in a community of practice of like-minded individuals seeking evaluator training.

CONCLUSION

We have described the pilot of a community-engaged evaluation institute that integrated competency-based curriculum with an experiential, co-learning teaching model. UEval brought community members and their community-informed cases into the university classroom to foster collaborative and mutually beneficial learning that would not have been achieved otherwise. When university and community members meet to co-learn around community-based cases, beyond disciplinary and sectorial boundaries, they bring diverse perspectives about complex problems. Results indicate the success of the UEval model in enhancing perceived learner competency gains, which will prepare them for effective professional practice and build their evaluation capacity. Reinforcing the teaching model of UEval as relevant and useful to evaluator education, recent scholarship emphasizes the benefits of competency-based evaluator education (Poth et al., 2020) and highlights the significance of practical and contextual competency gains (Garcia & Stevahn, 2020). Ongoing research about UEval will support the refinement of this evolving model and contribute to the sparse literature on evaluator education based on empirical evidence (King & Ayoo, 2020). This model can be employed in teaching contexts and disciplines beyond evaluation, such as psychology, nutrition, and allied health, which can benefit from an experiential component to help learners understand concepts more fully.

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Jason Daniels is a research and evaluation associate with the Community-University Partnership, University of Alberta. He teaches courses on psychology, research methods, and statistics. Jason has a background in cognitive development and has extensive experience doing research related to the effective use of technology in education, the impact of media use on child development, and student engagement.

Cheryl Poth is a professor and credentialed evaluator in the Centre for Applied Measurement and Evaluation in the Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta. She conducts research, teaches, and supervises graduate students in the areas of mixed methods research, program evaluation, qualitative research, classroom assessment and health sciences education.

Ana Karbajian is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Community Engagement, University of Alberta. Her research is focused on evaluator education and evaluation capacity building.

David Peacock is the director of community service-learning in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. His research encompasses community-university engagement policy and practice, student equity, curriculum theory, and “first generation” university student participation in experiential learning.

Jane Springett is a professor in the School of Public Health, University of Alberta. Over the last 15 years, she has been at the forefront of the development of participatory evaluation in the field of health promotion and health system intervention.

Ken Cor is assistant dean, assessment, in the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Alberta. Ken conducts research in educational measurement, assessment, and evaluation with a growing focus on the integrity of the research process.

Deanna Williamson is an associate professor in the Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta. Her research focuses on the well-being of families and their members within the context of social, economic, and political conditions. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on program planning and evaluation.

Emma Wallace is a program specialist at the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations responsible for coordinating capacity-building programming, leading the implementation and application of evaluative and learning information, and investigating methods

for encouraging diversity in the non-profit sector. Emma's research interests include strategic learning, evaluation and evaluation capacity building, and community engagement and development as a means to support poverty elimination.

Chelsea Freeborn is a PhD student at the University of Alberta in the Department of Human Ecology. Her area of research examines the experiences of Indigenous families accessing early learning and child care in an urban setting.

Mischa Taylor is completing her Master's in community engagement with a focus on qualitative research on integration experiences among newcomer groups.

Shelly Jun is the project coordinator for the Evaluation Capacity Network and supports community-driven research, evaluation, and capacity-building initiatives. She completed her MSc in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Alberta, exploring perceptions of technology-based interventions for adolescent alcohol misuse.

Jasmine Brazil is a strategic coordinator for the City of Edmonton. As an advocate for evaluation and credentialed evaluator (CE), Jasmine has been working in the field of evaluation for the last 10 years, doing community-based evaluation, evaluation within government, and community partnership for building capacity in evaluation.

Sheilah Pittman is director of community investment stewardship at United Way of the Alberta Capital Region. As a community member of UEval's learning advisory committee, she has a deep interest in supporting evaluative thinking in the not-for-profit sector.

Andrea Diamond is the grants impact associate at Edmonton Community Foundation. She works to understand how the Foundation affects the broader community, particularly in the areas of poverty reduction and equity.

Christina Popescu is currently the acting president (past director of professional development) of the Alberta Northwest Territories chapter of the Canadian Evaluation Society. She is also senior program manager with the Canadian Patient Safety Institute.