Offering Graduate Evaluation Degrees Online: Comparing Student Engagement in Two Canadian Programs

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Abstract: *This practice note describes and explores the experiences and lessons learned as we engaged learners in two online graduate evaluation programs: the University of Victoria's Graduate Certificate and Diploma in Evaluation Program, offered since fall 2011, and Carleton University's Graduate Diploma in Public Policy and Program Evaluation (DPPPE), offered online since fall 2016. Both programs are delivered to maximize the geographic accessibility of graduate evaluation education within and outside of Canada. While each program uses different teaching and learning strategies, four lessons are common to the two programs: set and meet (or exceed) clearly stated student expectations, set and then model a respectful and inclusive tone in online discussions, stretch online discussions by taking advantage of student expertise and experience, and use adult-oriented and rigorous teaching and learning methods that engage mature and mid-career learners.*

Keywords: *evaluation, graduate programs, online, teaching*

Résumé : *Cette note sur la pratique décrit et explore les expériences et les leçons tirées de la prestation de deux programmes d'études supérieures en ligne en évaluation : le programme de certificat et de diplôme de cycle supérieur en évaluation de l'Université de Victoria, offert depuis l'automne 2011, et le programme de diplôme de cycle supérieur en politique publique et en évaluation de programme de l'Université Carleton, offert en ligne depuis l'automne 2016. Les deux programmes sont offerts de manière à maximiser l'accessibilité géographique de la formation aux cycles supérieurs en évaluation au Canada et ailleurs dans le monde. Chaque programme utilise des stratégies d'enseignement et d'apprentissage différentes, mais quatre leçons sont communes aux deux programmes, soit : établir des attentes explicites de la part des étudiantes et étudiants et y répondre (ou les dépasser); établir la nécessité d'adopter un ton respectueux et inclusif dans les discussions et donner l'exemple; approfondir les discussions en profitant de l'expertise et de l'expérience des étudiantes et des étudiants; et utiliser des méthodes d'enseignement et d'apprentissage rigoureuses*

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et conçues pour des adultes, pour susciter l'intérêt d'apprenantes et d'apprenants d'âge mûr et à la mi-carrière.

Mots clés : *évaluation, programme d'études supérieures, en ligne, enseignement*

McPherson and Bacow (2015) suggest that by 2012, one-third of US college learners had taken at least one online course, compared to 10% in 2002 (p. 140). High-profile MOOCs (Massively Open Online Courses) are just the latest indication of the growth of online education (McPherson & Bacow, 2015). With many post-secondary institutions moving away from face-to-face classes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of online teaching and learning strategies has accelerated. Increasingly, the challenge is to engage adult learners in "deep" learning using multiple learning techniques and according to andragogical principles (Barab et al., 2001; Knowles, 1984). Andragogy is premised on the idea that education geared to adult learning is more self-directed and that learners take responsibility for their learning. Each program assumes that learners will engage the materials experientially using problem-solving approaches, hence the need for practice-oriented assessments.

This practice note explores experiences and lessons learned as we engaged learners online in two graduate programs in evaluation: the University of Victoria's Graduate Certificate and Diploma in Evaluation Program, offered since 2011, and Carleton University's Graduate Diploma in Public Policy and Program Evaluation (DPPPE), offered online since 2016. We begin by describing our programs and then compare our experiences engaging learners and delivering these programs.

SETTING THE STAGE

Origins of our two programs

Both the University of Victoria (UVic) and Carleton University are members of the Consortium of Universities for Evaluation Education (CUEE), an informal collaboration founded in 2008 to foster opportunities for graduate evaluation education in Canadian universities (McDavid et al., 2020). The UVic program was created in response to the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) Credentialed Evaluator (CE) Program, which began in 2010. The UVic School of Public Administration (SPA) obtained approval to offer a four-course Graduate Certificate with the option for learners to earn a Diploma (the equivalent of an additional three courses) upon completing a solo evaluation project.

The Carleton diploma was created in 2006 in response to growing demands from the federal Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) for more highly trained evaluators to staff evaluation units. At that time, six stand-alone, in-class courses were developed from existing resources. In response to diminishing resources for federal evaluation training between 2006 and 2015 (TBS, 2015), it was decided to transition the program online in 2016 to take advantage of a larger market.

Why online?

In 2003, UVic's SPA started offering its flagship Master of Public Administration Program (MPA) in an online format. Experience with the MPA indicated that learners valued the flexibility of online courses and often combined their graduate education with existing career and family commitments. The Graduate Certificate takes advantage of existing infrastructure and experience to offer a program that fits the School's online profile.

At Carleton, several timing considerations led to the decision to transition the diploma online. The province and university were investing in online education programs, and provincial eCampus funding was available. Consultations with the larger CES community indicated that the demand for online opportunities was increasing, and few Canadian universities were offering online graduate policy education programs. Investment in federal evaluation was diminishing, which made local in-class delivery untenable, and the School of Public Policy & Administration (SPPA) was investing in other online programs.

Designing the programs

By 2011, most graduate-level elective SPA courses were offered online. Several new graduate certificate courses were developed in methods and performance management. The program currently comprises two required courses and two electives, and new students are expected to meet a prerequisite in research methods. Nearly all applicants have previously earned graduate degrees.

By 2015, the DPPPE had been reformed from its original conception as stand-alone courses in methods and theory. A new adult-learning, cohort-based design (Knowles, 1984; Saltiel et al., 2002) was instituted in 2010, placing a major practicum project at its centre. The six courses were harmonized to mirror the phases in a typical real-world evaluation project: scoping, design, planning, data gathering, analysis, and reporting. With this design, transitioning the program online was simplified. Nearly all applicants hold graduate degree credentials, and all applicants must meet prerequisites in microeconomics and research methods.

Delivering the programs

Both programs are offered part-time over 16 months. The UVic program permits learners from its Master's and doctoral programs to enroll in any of the courses; Carleton's is a stand-alone program that permits limited enrolment in the preparatory courses by MPPA and PhD learners.

Both programs deliver foundational courses in the first two terms: survey of the field, theories of evaluation, performance management, and methods. The Carleton program designates two of six courses as an evaluation practicum: one aims at planning, and the second at data analysis, report writing, and presentation. The UVic diploma provides an optional add-on practicum for learners who want to conduct a full evaluation project.

For the learning platform, both programs employ Brightspace, a learning platform that provides flexibility to deliver content synchronously and/or

asynchronously using recorded lectures and built-in video classrooms (D2L, 2020). They follow roughly the same activities: introduction to the weekly module, readings from texts and articles, narrated lectures, online learning objects (e.g., TED talks, recorded interviews), discussion forums, and written assignments and exercises.

Several principles underlie the program designs. All courses are designed in advance; required course elements include detailed instructions for assignments and discussions, and evaluation rubrics ensure that assignment instructions correspond with grading expectations. Course syllabi, available in advance, function as contracts between instructors and learners (Barab et al., 2001). Instructor and learner expectations for participation are made explicit (Barab et al., 2001), and online codes of conduct are instituted and enforced to ensure that learners respect rules related to honesty, respect, accountability, and program integrity (Coleman, 2012). And learners in each program are introduced to their university's ethics frameworks for conducting fieldwork. Ethics approval is mandatory for UVic students conducting diploma-related evaluation projects, and Carleton learners must secure ethics approval for practicum projects, especially those involving vulnerable populations. Learners are expected to check in with instructors on the project's progress, and to raise hurdles experienced in their courses. These are used as key learning points.

ENGAGING THE LEARNERS: TWO PROGRAMS—TWO EXAMPLES

The UVic and Carleton programs employ similar strategies to engage in "deep" learning (Barab et al., 2001; Knowles, 1984); with learners studying from a distance, the necessity for creative ways to garner participation increases relative to classroom teaching. We describe two strategies to engage learners: online discussions and online practicums.

The UVic introductory course in the graduate certificate: Engaging the content

UVic graduate certificate learners enrol from across Canada and beyond, making synchronous meetings difficult. Existing graduate SPA electives have been asynchronous, so learner-to-learner and learner-to-instructor interactions are one-on-one or through posts to weekly discussion forums. This approach builds an inclusive and effective learning environment, encouraging follow-up discussions between learners and instructor as well as among class members.

The introductory course examines program evaluation and performance measurement in public and non-profit organizations and focuses on skills development to model programs, measure key constructs, select appropriate research designs, conduct both quantitative and qualitative program evaluations, and develop performance measurement systems (University of Victoria, 2019). Learners are notified pre-delivery that over the semester they must each work on a design for an actual evaluation. Certificate and graduate learners rely on their workplace or a current or previous co-op employer to identify projects.

Three design strategies underlie how learners are engaged. First, the beginning session features an ice-breaker discussion, such as whether it is possible to be objective, both personally and in terms of one's own research and evaluation work. This three-day discussion begins with all class members posting their 100-word personal views. Through iterative discussions including the instructor and other class members, it is typical for students to post between 5 and 10 times per week. Each week, the instructor posts a wrap-up summarizing the discussion and offers general comments that preview key themes for the next week.

Second, weekly discussions in the first half of the course are tied to the final assignment. Learners post a first draft of specified segments of their emerging evaluation designs for formative feedback from instructor and peers. In successive weeks, additional elements of their designs are posted and commented on, ensuring that by Week 7 of 12, each student has had and contributed feedback/learning to improve the quality of their final designs.

Third, informal peer leaders are used to advance class learning. These leaders are students who stand out by engaging fellow learners and the instructor from the first class, and are identified simply by tracking the number and quality of postings. Often three or four leaders are called upon to elicit deeper explorations of topics and invite participation, or are asked to post first on designated threads. As an example, in one offering of the course, an Indigenous student with experience as a leadership trainer volunteered his perspectives on the weekly discussion topics and encouraged the class to engage with him, which led to in-depth discussions of evaluation issues from an Indigenous perspective that went beyond the assigned course resources.

The Carleton experience with the practicum project: Engaging content and clients

Teams of Carleton diploma learners work synchronously through video and forum discussions on their practicum assignments. All learners are required to identify a project midway in the first term, either assigned or solicited on their own, and to work on these in groups of two to four. Clients are invited by the program supervisor to participate, and each relationship is formalized in an MOU that lays out the expectations of each party over the duration of the program.

The program design is such that four preparatory courses are delivered over the first fall and winter terms, and two dedicated practicum courses assist learners in working through their practicum design and delivery. The first term prepares learners in theory and quantitative methods, while the second concentrates on qualitative methods and introduces the first practicum course to build a working evaluation design. Data gathering occurs over the spring and summer while students take another methods course, and the final term focuses on data analysis and reporting through the second practicum course. Learners check in with clients and instructors at critical points, and the program culminates in a final presentation to clients in December of the following year. Clients are asked to

commit approximately five hours monthly, and they remain involved through a dedicated team captain and assigned instructor.

Engagement of deep learning and participation is supported using the following strategies:

- course sequencing and content support active learning by ensuring that projects are scoped discretely with active participation of clients;
- ethical considerations appropriate for that stage are introduced in each course;
- the Brightspace platform enables synchronous visual group meeting rooms, data storage, and discussion forums;
- program instructors meet at predetermined times in the year to ensure optimal coordination and hand-off of project responsibilities;
- grading for each course is led by the assigned course instructor, but coordination among instructors is encouraged to ensure consistency of feedback;
- each project group is assigned an instructor to act as mentor, and external resources are invited where needed to enrich content; the program supervisor acts as the ultimate facilitator of the projects, reducing the stress felt by learners in practicum assignments (Maidment, 2006);
- a learner champion is resident in or familiar with the program; this is critical to success, encouraging inclusive collaborative learning; it also ensures that learners are committed to high-quality outputs (Seagrave & Holt, 2003);
- the practicum courses are designed flexibly, with instructors engaging the practicum groups rather than the entire cohort; learners benefit from a combination of class delivery strategies and small group discussions (Saltiel et al., 2002).

CHALLENGES ENGAGING LEARNERS ONLINE

Ongoing time commitment and written feedback

Instructors must be available for several hours each week, depending on cohort numbers and activities (Mandernach et al., 2013). Each program commits learners to engage in discussion forums between Wednesdays and Fridays; with 20–25 learners, instructors can post up to 40 times per week. However, in weeks in which learners are posting evaluation design elements for formative feedback, instructor postings can be as high as 70–80 postings, offering ways of facilitating general learning as well as specific feedback. It is possible to reduce this time and hold online discussions with individuals (UVic) and groups (Carleton), but time requirements remain significant. At Carleton, a teaching assistant provides support, but the instructor must remain present for challenging problems, and the time commitments extend far beyond those of in-class equivalents. While studies

suggest no difference between online and in-class learning outcomes (Cummings et al., 2015), the energy required for online learning is much greater, especially when working with mid-career and mature learners. Learners often welcome feedback from their peers, especially as most are already accomplished in their fields. In essence, learners can be informed instructors using practical knowledge to support their feedback.

For learners, online courses typically take eight to ten hours a week of preparation and participation. Assignments require additional time, although in both programs the assignments reflect the course content in ways that overlap with online discussions. In the UVic program, for example, the first assignment is a critical assessment of an actual evaluation report. Two weeks before the due date, an online discussion focuses on an evaluation report included in the course materials. In the Carleton program, the first assignment is to practice with theories of change, with online exercises emphasizing logic, objectivity, and results pathways.

Programmatic support is critical to success

A critical issue for any online program is whether resources (time, money, expertise) are sufficient to develop and continuously renew courses. Each program is familiar with online learning and has access to expertise that many university programs do not enjoy. That said, university commitment to course and program development is fundamental. Whereas the UVic program had access to limited start-up funds for initial course development, the Carleton program competed for provincial funding and was able to pay for university expertise. Universities continue to exhibit mixed commitment to online support, although this is changing given the COVID-19 pandemic.

One notable difference between the two programs is the level of ongoing administrative support for each learning cohort. The Carleton diploma operates as a stand-alone program with a dedicated program supervisor who coordinates course delivery and the practicum projects. Group practicum projects are built into program expectations. The UVic certificate courses double as electives in other programs; if learners choose to conduct an evaluation project, they work with a faculty supervisor and a client. The UVic diploma is built on top of the requirements for the certificate program.

Engaging and coordinating non-faculty instructors

Both programs rely heavily on non-faculty instructors (five of six courses in Carleton's case). Coordination costs can therefore be high for dedicated faculty (Cummings et al., 2015). This often means that the program supervisor is responsible for maintaining coherence over the program's duration and that creativity is needed to maintain instructor/learner engagement. Communication and transparency are critical. That said, the value placed on such "administrative" effort can be low or not well understood by university or even unit management. Ongoing communication is critical to ensuring that supervisor workloads are reasonable, and keeping good instructors over time can be difficult, because responsibilities

are seen as related to courses rather than to the program as a whole (Mandernach et al., 2013).

LESSONS LEARNED ENGAGING LEARNERS ONLINE

Setting and then meeting expectations

As important as the instructor's presence and expertise, are the setting and meeting of expectations. At the outset of each course, it is essential to indicate when the instructor will be available, how long they will take to respond to questions, and the time expectations for returning assignments. The instructor must consistently meet or exceed those expectations, or there is high risk that the course will lose momentum. The introductory courses for both programs, led by full-time faculty, set the tone for learners and indicate the level of commitment expected.

Setting a respectful and inclusive tone

How the instructor interacts with learners online is important for setting the tone for the discussions. Including language around respectful interactions in the syllabus is essential. The UVic program relies on instructors to model appropriate online behaviours, whereas the Carleton program requires learners to develop codes of conduct for group interactions in addition to MOUs with clients that reflect both project products and the research and ethical aspects of the process.

Stretching the discussion

Online discussions based on the readings and on a given week's topic often evolve and provide opportunities to explore additional topics. What starts as a discussion of the validity of research designs might evolve into one on the credibility of drug trials, given the importance of drug-company funding. Both learners and instructor can easily find online resources that enable discussions of the challenges of designing and implementing "gold standard" research designs. Even though some conversations range across topics that appear (again) later in the courses, taking advantage of the moment is an important way to enrich the course and engage class members. As ethical discussions can be unfamiliar, learners must be encouraged to engage material with openness.

Online learners are different

Evaluation learners at Carleton and UVic tend to be older, more established, and more experienced than their full-time Master's equivalents. These diplomas and certificates attract mid-career professionals looking to upgrade their credentials and, as a result, student expectations for learning tend to be much higher. Learning techniques must be adult-oriented and usually much more rigorous. This a lesson learned over time, and it points to an opportunity to network these learners with regular Master's learners. The potential for engaging in interesting projects or learning events is significant, and a gift for each program.

It is important to engage with adult learners with passion and energy

Providing instruction in an online environment is different from in-class delivery. Although instructors in both programs are well established in in-class settings, the nature of engagement to ensure momentum in both synchronous and asynchronous online learning requires a much different approach, one centred on being present with passion and emotion (Giossos et al., 2008). In-class engagements rely on spontaneous learning approaches, whereas online engagements require a steady and deep-learning approach with significant emotional investment from both instructor and learner, because adult learners *want* to engage with the materials, each other, and the instructor(s) with deep-seated commitment. Both programs rely on instructors with passion for the field and a commitment to student learning that draws on significant experience (Pavlakis & Kaiteldou, 2012). Expectations by learners for course and program engagement are much higher than those of in-class deliveries for new learners (Rovai, 2002).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While graduate evaluation education is still in its infancy, it is developing in ways that offer opportunities to reach mid-career and mature learners who otherwise would not be able to access programs. Two recent inventories of programs in the United States (LaVelle, 2019) and Canada (Hunter & McDavid, 2019) found that few existing programs were offered online (three in the United States and three in Canada). Given the general growth in online post-secondary education, we predict that more online programs will emerge, particularly for those wanting professional credentials.

The programs illustrated, with their different histories and institutional environments, reflect the diversity of educational options in our field. The Carleton program, which responded to changes in the federal evaluation environment to broaden its reach, will need to consider how strongly to reach across international boundaries for learners; this will present both opportunities and challenges. The UVic School is in the midst of a faculty renewal process, with several new members who have evaluation-related expertise. Such expertise and interests will be reflected increasingly in the certificate and diploma program.

Both programs have enjoyed considerable success since their inceptions. For Carleton, moving the program online has resulted in more applications and more diverse and practitioner-focused cohorts of learners. At UVic, the program has consistently attracted high-quality applicants who contribute a unique, practitioner-based perspective to the online courses they share with other graduate learners. Both programs have been able to graduate most of those accepted into the programs: Carleton, 75%, and UVic, 72%.

Although online delivery is challenging due to its up-front requirements and ongoing demands for faculty and student commitment, it offers a way to reach and train mid-career practitioners that produces outcomes rivaling those

of on-campus graduate education (Cummings et al., 2015; Chiero & Beare, 2010; McGready & Brookmeyer, 2013).

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