Community Engaged Learning & Well-Being

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An Introduction

Community engaged learning (CEL) is a praxis-oriented pedagogy that sees students engaging in projects developed collaboratively with community partners for mutually beneficial outcomes. In many contexts, CEL is referred to by alternate terms, including 'community service learning' and 'service learning' in English; 'apprentissage par le service' and 'apprentissage en milieu communautaire' in French. Notwithstanding inconsistencies of terminology within and between institutions, the overarching objective of this unique form of experiential learning is to foster community-university collaboration in an effort to address wide-ranging societal issues. By participating in CEL endeavours, students can bolster their personal and professional agency, develop valuable skill sets, and engage in meaningful work to advance the public good (Edwards, 2021; Finley & Reason, 2016; Grain & Lund, 2018; Sperduti & Smeltzer, 2022). However, achieving these outcomes requires an ethical commitment to reciprocity, to robust forms of reflection, and to an ethos of inclusion, equity, and accessibility (Levkoe et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2015; Stowe et al., 2022). These components are also essential to proactively promoting CEL students' mental health and overall well-being, especially in the face of the exponential growth of experiential learning throughout higher education.

Based on primary research we conducted in 2022-23 with faculty and staff at 12 Canadian universities across six provinces, there is strong desire across the country to address a range of CEL-specific issues. In particular, individuals expressed a need for avenues to share research, resources, and wise practices aimed at supporting students' well-being before, during, and after their CEL experiences. The goal, then, of this workshop is to bring together individuals who coordinate, facilitate, and participate in CEL to collectively engage in discussions about this important area of theory and practice and to produce sustainable networks of support.

These conversations are intended to be critical, open, honest, and premised on a shared understanding that students may encounter a wide range of experiences during their CEL activities that can have both beneficial and detrimental impacts on their mental health. On the one hand, students may feel that they are making a positive difference in the lives of others, reducing their own anxiety about future job preparedness, and developing a greater sense of personal agency (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Lapointe & Underdown, 2022). On the other hand, students may see up-close the deleterious effects of systemic injustice in their own backyards and / or find painful parallels in their placement to their own life experiences. As a result, some students may feel empowered by the experience of working with community partners for the betterment of society, while others may feel disheartened by the unfairness they encounter and struggle with their capacity to address 'wicked' problems (Smeltzer et al., 2022). Attending to these kinds of complex emotions has become increasingly important in the aftermath of the pandemic, together with shifts in the geo-political landscape and the deleterious impacts of climate change (Ezarik, 2022; Hill et al., 2021; Linden & Stuart, 2020; Reis et al., 2023). The need for open discussions is particularly imperative given that CEL opportunities are promoted by universities as friction-free, transformative experiences, which we know is not – and arguably should not – always be the case (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018; Maples et al., 2022; Raddon & Harrison, 2015). Accordingly, we have welcomed storytelling that shines the light on experiences that include adversity and personal and professional growth. By normalizing discussions about the challenges associated with facilitating and engaging in these kinds of hands-on pedagogical activities, we can collectively find ways of supporting students to address difficult encounters and emotions.

Further, as we tackle the weighty question of how we can help ensure that CEL is ethical, accessible, inclusive, and geared toward helping students find pathways to the lives and livelihoods *they* have reason to value, we must foreground the intersectional barriers impacting many students' ability to participate. For a range of reasons, significant swathes of the university student population cannot, or feel they are unable to partake in CEL. If they *do* participate, many also confront problematic 'hidden curricula' within and beyond the classroom (Aubrecht, 2019; Breunig, 2019). As equity and inclusion are intimately intertwined with mental health and well-being, they must always be our starting point.

This collection, published by the extraordinary Rose Garden Press (rosegardenpress.ca), includes tangible approaches to supporting CEL students' well-being based on the wise practices shared by workshop participants. On the concluding page is a QR code that links to a website – www.cel-resources.ca – that we hope will serve as an open-source platform for all things CEL. Please add ideas; links to resources, guides, and scholarly materials; as well as calls for upcoming events, publications, positions, and grants.

Thank you for caring about the well-being of every member of the CEL assemblage – students, community partners, faculty, and staff.

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Wise Practices

Learning is not something that only happens in the brain; our bodies, and our mind-body connections to the human and non-human beings and places around us, actively affect what and how we learn. When we reimagine the context for learning in our classrooms, by shifting from a 'head-first' dynamic to a whole-body practice, we send powerful signals to students about what kinds of knowledge are valued in our spaces, and what kinds of creativity are welcome. Whole body and mind-body-world learning also encourages students to build bonds of trust among themselves, fostering an active and supportive classroom community. This community is invaluable for helping students overcome the mental hurdles of taking their campus-based learning into 'the real world.' One small but simple step toward whole body learning, which also inherently fosters community, is the classroom warm-up exercise. The best ones encourage students to use their bodies as well as their voices, to whatever extent feels good to them, and to interact in low-stakes ways. Students could describe their feelings about a project by making a brief body 'sculpture' and then share it with a neighbour. As a group, they could play a round of 'Zip Zap Zop' (so fun – https://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/node/29). Or they could just do three yoga poses: we like to ask the room to nominate poses, and often invite students to lead on the pose they suggested.

two

We strongly recommend that universities establish a well-being ombudsperson trained in ethical CEL principles for students to contact if they want or require mental health support. More specifically, this individual would serve as the point person to assist CEL students who need to access institutional mental health resources or to talk with a professional about their CEL experiences. This ombudsperson must not be their course instructor or placement supervisor. The ombudsperson would also be available to facilitate conversations between students, instructors, and / or staff members about a range of well-being issues. If feasible, this individual would be introduced at the beginning of each CEL course, with their name and contact information included on course syllabi. Students' mental health will benefit from knowing that, if needed, they have access to a safe, impartial, confidential ombudsperson who understands the potential challenges associated with participating in CEL activities.

three

We recommend that universities encourage or require a written agreement between CEL students and their respective community partners. The agreement should outline the expectations for each party, including the outcomes desired by both the student and the partner, as well as the supports / resources provided to each by the institution. While specificity is helpful, the agreement should also allow for flexibility, recognizing that the needs of the student or community partner may change throughout the duration of the experience. To this end, the agreement should be used as a reference document during check-in discussions to help ensure that the placement is mutually beneficial. All parties should have an opportunity to address if and how the experience is transpiring in ways that correspond with expectations determined at the outset.

four

Universities often have policies that govern at what point during a degree students may engage in CEL or how much time they may devote to a CEL experience. These policies are often created with the intention of protecting students' time and to lighten their workloads. Certainly, we support limits being placed on engagement hours to mitigate labour exploitation. However, students may experience certain types of restrictions as barriers that, in turn, can impact their mental health and well-being. In designing CEL participation policies, we thus advocate that institutions operate from the principle that students are best able to manage their own academic, personal, and employment schedules and workload. When policies are intended to help safeguard students' time, we recommend that this intention be explicitly stated at the outset of potential CEL endeavours and that students be allowed to choose whether they wish the policy to apply in their respective situations.

five

Students often cannot receive the supports or accommodations they need because they do not have a formal mental health diagnosis. However, mental health symptoms frequently do not present until young adulthood, which means that university students may experience indicators for the first time during their studies (e.g., in a CEL placement). It can then be years before a mental health diagnosis is formally made as the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) often requires evidence of recurring symptoms. Therefore, university staff should, on a case-by-case basis, work with students who self-identify as experiencing mental health symptoms to determine whether they have a formal diagnosis and, in turn, guide them in accessing the appropriate services.

six

Instructors should incorporate culturally informed and diverse voices into course content to increase the likelihood that students will see their identity represented in the classroom. It is also recommended that CEL instructors facilitate peer-to-peer relationship development in the classroom. These relationships can then be used as a base for facilitating vulnerability, empathy, and compassion among classmates. Additionally, CEL classrooms should be student-centred, incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy, and include 'brave space' concepts and practices. Finally, instructors should implement resilience-focused and asset-based reflection experiences that highlight the strengths of the community as well as students' own capacities as individuals. These reflections should be intentional in helping students understand that individuals and communities are more than their trauma.

seven

Students are not blank slates; they come into learning spaces with their own present and past life experiences and learning histories. During their CEL placements, students may encounter settings that address challenging social issues such as gender-based violence or racial oppression. They may also be expected to navigate multiple relationships and project obligations, as well as power dynamics embedded in academic and community worlds. We therefore recommend that CEL programming takes into consideration both a Trauma Informed (TI) lens and a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. A TI lens helps everyone involved in CEL programming to recognize that students lead complex lives, which may include experiences of trauma. This lens also helps instructors plan learning activities and encounters that resist re-traumatization and are responsive to student needs. A UDL framework that complements this TI lens can assist instructors in anticipating and addressing the needs of different learners, including students with diverse abilities and ethno-cultural backgrounds, those with complex family obligations, as well as first-generation and other 'non-traditional' students.

eight

Disabled students have a lot on their plates. On top of their academic and social responsibilities, they work hard every day to manage embodied symptoms as well as environmental and attitudinal barriers. System navigation and self-advocacy to secure accommodations takes even more time, energy, and effort. The best way to support the success and well-being of disabled students participating in CEL activities is to anticipate their presence, understand the barriers they face, and proactively work with them to navigate common challenges. Conversations with community partners must also prioritize best practices for supporting disabled students. These discussions should include open dialogue about ableism, stereotypes, and stigma. All sites should express enthusiastic commitment to welcoming students with diverse bodies and minds. Remember that some individuals will choose not to disclose their disabilities. Whether they have accommodations or not, everyone deserves to feel safe and welcomed in all learning spaces.

Person-first language (i.e., 'person with a disability') is often championed as the most politically correct language, however many people prefer to use identity-first language (i.e., 'disabled person'). The use of 'disabled student' here reclaims disability as identity (i.e., 'I am disabled'). It is also a way to emphasize the socio-relational nature of disability (i.e., 'I am Deaf, but I am only disabled when auditory information is not provided in a format that is accessible to me'). Person-first and identity-first language are both acceptable; each reflects a different disability orientation. It is important to acknowledge and respect each individual's preference.

nine

We recommend that instructors consider using Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) in their courses (https://constructivedialogue.org). CDI strives to translate rigorous behavioural science research into educational tools that are evidence-informed, practical, engaging, and scalable to equip students with skills for constructive, open-minded, and respectful communication. One example of such a tool is the evidence-based learning approach called 'Perspectives.' This tool is comprised of eight brief and engaging online modules, each followed by a peer-to-peer reflection conversation, which have been used by hundreds of instructors and thousands of students across North America to good effect. We believe that such a tool can help foster deep learning on campuses by aiding students to cultivate intellectual humility, to welcome and support diverse perspectives and worldviews, and to develop greater capacity to manage emotions and engage in challenging conversations.

ten

An essential component of a mental health program, and of well-being for CEL students, should be regular contemplative practice sessions. To this end, universities should have a Contemplative Practice Coordinator (CPC) attached to CEL programs. This person should ideally be a part of the university community but can also be an outside consultant if in-house expertise is not available. 'Contemplative practice' can have a wide definition and is not limited only to meditation or mindfulness practices. For example, movement practices, journaling, and crafting can all be considered contemplative practices. What is more important is the intention to develop interiority, cultivate present-centred awareness, and foster meaningful reflection for CEL students. Having a CPC as part of the CEL team will help students navigate difficult emotions and challenging situations, while giving them the tools to have a more meaningful experience.

eleven

Discussions of CEL often present a narrative of success, creating friction-free expectations for students. However, experiencing disappointment may be part of the journey. We thus highlight the importance of critical hope, a belief that we have the agency to make a difference despite fissures in the system. We therefore recommend that universities establish a CEL student mentor program to facilitate knowledge-sharing between students who have participated in CEL, as well as students preparing to embark on placements, to help manage expectations. Many students envisage tackling complex problems during their CEL experience. However, the disparities between expectations and lived experiences can sometimes lead to defeatism in students, adversely impacting their well-being. Establishing a CEL mentor program will allow students to receive insights from peers who have navigated similar experiences, bridging the gap between initial expectations and realities while fostering a sense of preparedness. Although the impacts of CEL are context-specific and not one-size-fits-all, the significance of hearing first-hand experiences from peers who have engaged in CEL activities is invaluable. By providing an avenue for students to learn from the real-world experiences of their peers, a mentor program offers a proactive strategy for addressing the anxieties and uncertainties that may accompany CEL placements. Beyond managing expectations, a mentorship program serves as an alumni network for CEL students within the institution to facilitate ongoing connections and continuous knowledge-sharing.

At some point in the CEL experience, students should have the opportunity to visually map the connections, relationships, and structures they can identify as part of their experience. From a pedagogical perspective, there are two learning outcomes instructors can facilitate. First, students should (hopefully) recognize that power dynamics are embedded within CEL programming and that their 'experience' of learning is not some kind of neutral phenomenon but is, in fact, a constructed, engineered experience with varying consequences for the other humans with whom they interact. Second, and most importantly, learners should be invited to deconstruct the notion that the 'community' is something 'out there' to be 'engaged' with, and wrestle with the proposition that they and their educational institutional are de facto constituents of the community. Visual system mapping or power mapping exercises can facilitate these realizations, as they provide opportunities to prompt students with questions about the various agendas at play in CEL programming.

When using a strengths-based approach and / or the Clifton Strengths tool, it is important to move beyond mere identification of strengths. Reflection and application are also necessary for a strengths-based approach to support student well-being. By embedding strengths into CEL experiences, students can communicate and harness their unique talents with community partners to help co-create mutually beneficial outcomes. A strengths-based approach also helps students understand their natural talents for effective team building and collaboration. Knowing and articulating strengths can help students feel confident in who they are and how they work. Gaining greater awareness of what they do best, and advancing their strengths, provides CEL students with greater enjoyment and success. Additionally, students often feel anxious when contemplating the transition to employment post-graduation. This anxiety partly stems from concerns regarding the value of their skills and experience in the eyes of prospective employers. As part of a strengths-based reflective program component, activities that support students in identifying and articulating the value of their strengths, skills, and experience in a professional context are helpful to increase self-confidence and motivation, and to decrease anxiety and 'imposter syndrome.'

fourteen

Ignore the academic hierarchal structures and treat one another as relatives.

Host monthly meetings with shared food and discussions of research, practice, and self-care.

In CEL workload agreements, include hours earmarked for ceremony and holistic self-care in the community.

fifteen

CEL provides an opportunity to deconstruct the traditional role of students as passive consumers of knowledge and to transform it into an active role as knowledge producers. This shift can be supported through increased flexibility in assessment format and style. For instance, nearly all CEL courses include a reflection component. However, if reflection exercises have stringent requirements, such as specific prompts or rubrics, they can lose value as they come to be viewed solely as 'assignments' that are undertaken for the sake of completion and, more worryingly, may reduce the opportunity for students to truly and honestly reflect on their experiences and the issues they are grappling with at different points in their journeys. By moving toward a completion-based journal, in which students are encouraged to reflect honestly and frequently on any area of their learnings, including frustrations, roadblocks, or questions, reflection can be used as a tool for students to process their CEL experience and have autonomy within this experience, as opposed to producing materials for the sole purpose of evaluation.

sixteen

My third-year disabilities course requires students to work with a community partner to assess the overall accessibility of their facility and to determine how welcoming it is for persons with a wide range of disabilities. Since the advent of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) in 2005, all facilities must comply with accessibility standards specific to their type and size, to ensure fair and equitable access for all. A project of this nature allows students to become more aware of the many accessibility issues encountered by individuals within our communities and affords opportunities for creative problem solving as a group. It also provides organizations with a meaningful snapshot of the things they are doing well and those that require improvement from an accessibility perspective. Giving students an opportunity to liaise directly with service providers allows them to develop the critical communication skills necessary to become strong leaders in our communities, while also developing an empathetic mindset toward the needs of others.

seventeen

From a community partner's perspective, we need clear instructions from institutions regarding procedures if a student in a CEL experience requires mental health support. In some cases, the 'host' organization has internal resources but may not have the capacity to support students and / or may not be able to accept potential liability for a student's well-being.

eighteen

Create a coaching role to support CEL students. This coach should understand student placements and expectations; the complexities and sensitivities non-profit leaders face; and be well-connected to the community. In this current moment, non-profits are facing some of the most difficult challenges in their existence. Non-profit leaders often do not have the time or capacity to support CEL placements; they barely have the time needed to support their own teams. Having a coach who is neither an academic advisor nor a placement supervisor allows a safe space for supportive conversation that empowers students to deal with their own needs, care, and goals. Students should also have content in class prior to their placements that helps them understand the unique issues community organizations face to ensure they have a sensitivity to a range of challenges. Students should also have content in class that teaches them about psychological safety and mental health first aid. They need to be sufficiently self-aware to establish boundaries and know how to ask for help when they need it.

nineteen

Peer networks are an excellent tool to support student well-being. We advise placing students into small groups of five or six at the commencement of their placements. Students should be given as much freedom as possible in deciding how, and how often, to keep in touch with other members of their group. Peer networks have several benefits:

- They allow students to check in with one another about their concerns, which can be less intimidating than reaching out to more formal avenues of support.
- They allow students to give support, which can be an empowering experience, especially for individuals unfamiliar with the CEL environment.
- They give students more ownership and control over their experiences.
- They support students in developing authentic relationships with their peers and provide them with the opportunity to grow and learn together.
- They provide a model of community that students can draw on in their wider CEL experiences.

twenty

In 2022, concern for overall student wellness and well-being sparked debate among students, staff, and faculty at our institution. Despite the official narrative that policy responses 'take time,' students co-founded a new campus-community initiative, The Care Collective. The Care Collective is a student-led gathering space where students, Elders, staff, and faculty co-create beloved community, engage in healing activities, and plan action toward decolonization and social justice. We have decided to sustain The Care Collective for the foreseeable future as a grassroots, student-led forum to address justice, safety, community connection, and well-being. The form and substance of Care Collective activities are shaped by each new cohort of students. The pedagogical value is that beloved community and caring for one another are central to decolonization and abolition. Therefore, this dreaming work extends beyond the classroom to local community. Examples of The Care Collective activities include Elder teachings, healing circles, sharing food and dreams, planning co-liberation and mobilization, and mutual aid initiatives.

twenty-one

Mindfulness can help students to regulate their emotions and connect with their peers, instructors, and communities. Some practical examples of mindfulness include deep breathing, muscle relaxation, mindful colouring, and meditation. Mindfulness can also reduce students' stress and anxiety, as well as elevate their mood. Learning mindfulness and the importance of student wellness can help students be engaged in healthy practices they can utilize throughout their learning journey.

twenty-two

In programs where students navigate their CEL experience in a more independent or isolated fashion, adding a cohort-based component can tremendously benefit their well-being. For example, we recommend hosting ongoing, whole-group meet-ups for CEL students to come together to collectively reflect on and discuss their experiences with peers. This type of activity allows students to process their individual experiences through sharing with and hearing from others. Having a space and a community to share anxieties, struggles, and insecurities surrounding their CEL experience can help students feel less alone, reduce 'imposter syndrome,' and provide additional resources for addressing challenges.

twenty-three

Students who struggle during their CEL experience often do not know how or when to request support from their on- or off-campus supervisors. Whole group meetings may not be effective, as many students will not express their need for support in such settings. We therefore recommend strategically timed 'check in' surveys that students complete throughout their placement. Timing will vary according to the length of the experience (e.g., one week, three months, nine months). For example, during a three-month CEL experience, surveys should be completed by students at least three times; ideally at the start, at the midway point, and a couple of weeks prior to the conclusion of the placement. Each survey should take less than ten minutes to complete and include a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. These questions should ask students about their experiences to date, their overall level of confidence, whether they feel they have the supports they need to conduct their work, how often they meet with their supervisor, etc.

In instances where a student is working in a community-based setting for a sustained period and the CEL host supervises the student's work closely enough to be able to provide evaluative feedback, a midpoint assessment is a valuable formative tool for the student's growth and learning. In the day-to-day, many supervisors provide feedback to the student about their *tasks*, but not about their *general performance*. Receiving general feedback builds on a student's ability to identify their strengths as well as gaps in their skill set and helps build their confidence. Further, providing such feedback *during* the experience (as opposed to only at the end) gives the student an opportunity to work on improvement as the CEL experience continues.

We strongly encourage the development of an overarching assessment plan for CEL programming that incorporates student and community partner well-being into its goals. We recommend the *Developmental Evaluation* approach, as outlined by Better Evaluation (www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/developmental-evaluation). This approach supports rapid, real-time feedback of participants and uses this information to support the learning of all who are involved. The ability to collect and apply feedback in real-time is particularly relevant for CEL programs and initiatives, which often involve complex, dynamic, and ever-evolving environments.

twenty-six

We encourage instructors to explore contract grading as a method of alleviating student stress and to focus on the effort students invest in their CEL learning. As CEL attracts students from a variety of disciplines, contract grading and other forms of un-grading can help to level the playing field and ensure students, regardless of their background skills and knowledge, can learn and succeed in their CEL course work. To learn more, explore this resource: https://writingcommons.org/article/so-your-instructor-is-using-contract-grading/

twenty-seven

The creation of personalized self-care plans by students engaged in CEL is a crucial step in supporting their mental well-being. To effectively care for others in their community, students must first care for themselves. Engaging in self-care fosters resilience, empowering students to respond constructively to stressors. Resilience can equip students with the capacity to maintain perspective, contextualize situations, and recognize that certain conditions are beyond their control. Self-care plans should encompass the Eight Dimensions of Wellness, which include physical, emotional, social, intellectual, occupational, environmental, spiritual, and financial wellness (www.uwo.ca/health// enhance_wellness/dimensions/index.html). Neglecting one dimension can adversely impact other dimensions. The self-care planning process begins with self-reflection, where students identify their strengths, weaknesses, stress triggers, and coping mechanisms. This self-awareness helps them to identify potential stressors associated with their CEL work, allowing them to proactively address challenges when they arise. Students can establish specific, measurable self-care goals tailored to their well-being. They can then build a toolbox of self-care strategies tailored to their unique needs and regularly revisit and adjust their plans to adapt to changing circumstances. Additionally, students should reflect on existing self-care strategies within each Dimension of Wellness, assess their effectiveness, and introduce new strategies for enhancing wellness in each dimension. This comprehensive approach empowers students to maintain their mental well-being, supporting their commitment to community engagement while safeguarding their own health.

Notes

for community engaged learning / community service learning / well-being

Resources

CEL-RESOURCES.CA

www.cel-resources.ca

Need assistance?
Contact Sandra Smeltzer: ssmeltze@uwo.ca

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