

UEval: A Model of Experiential Learning in Evaluation for Students and Community Partners

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Introduction

Currently there is a significant lack of evaluation-focused educational opportunities in Canadian universities¹ and more specifically at the University of Alberta.² To our knowledge, across the entire University there exist only four graduate courses and one undergraduate course introducing students to evaluation. As introductory modules, these courses provide a basic foundation of evaluation theory, but do not prepare students with the more advanced learning necessary for evaluation ‘in practice’. This is problematic as evaluation is used extensively across sectors (e.g. health, education, human services) as an applied approach to measuring the effectiveness of programs and policies and is in great demand by government, non-profits, and business. Bridging theory with practice through experiential learning opportunities and contributing to society’s ability to provide high quality services are core components of the University of Alberta’s Institutional Strategic Plan *For the Public Good*. Through experiential learning, students learn how to apply their knowledge in community settings, which more thoroughly prepares them for the workforce in a way that benefits them as learners and the professional sector as a whole.

Evaluation is playing an ever-increasing role in the health and social sector to assess the effectiveness of programs, policies and practices in children’s services, education, health, and competencies in other professional contexts. For this reason, evaluation capacity building has become a professional priority area for most community-based organizations (CBOs).³ To explore the evaluation capacity needs in Alberta, the TLEF PI and Co-I’s (Gokiert, Poth, Cor, Springett), conducted an extensive needs assessment funded by SSHRC.^{4,5} There were three key findings: 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.^{1,6} Students are eager to build new skills and are seeking community-based research, evaluation and learning opportunities.^{7,8} Students recognize the need to equip themselves with contextual knowledge and skills needed to navigate a social sector with complex challenges.^{9,10}

The purpose of this project is to respond to an identified university *and* community need to provide experiential evaluation-based learning opportunities for under/graduate students at the University of Alberta. We will develop the framework, implement a pilot, and embed an improvement and sustainability strategy for a summer evaluation institute (*UEval*) for under/graduate students, to enhance their ability to learn about and practice evaluation on community issues through collaboration with community stakeholders. As a unique departure from having students work in the community as service learners, we will be bringing students and community together as co-learners at the University over a weeklong period to enhance learning experiences for students, and provide quality and accessible education for community stakeholders. Specifically, students and community stakeholders will collaborate around cases that are brought forward by the stakeholders themselves (project-based curricula). Not only will students learn through an experiential process from community stakeholders, these same stakeholders will gain support and learning around a case that is pertinent to them. Such learning

opportunities are therefore intended to be of equal benefit to both the student and the community-based organizations involved.¹¹

Theory

This TLEF project will utilize Wenger's¹² social learning theory (and its constructivist foundations) in the development of *UEval*; a co-learning space for students and community stakeholders to engage in experiential learning. Through a social learning theory lens, learning is viewed as a social rather than an individual process. As such, the focus of learning is placed on participation and active engagement in order to enhance the meaningfulness of the experience. By bringing under/graduate students and community stakeholders together over a week using a combination of learning styles – didactic and socratic – learning will be informative (*what* we know) and transformative (*how* we know). By the end of *UEval*, learners will therefore acquire knowledge about evaluation theory and processes, gain contextual understanding about how to *apply* this knowledge in practice, and develop a critical lens for questioning and reflecting upon the historical, social and political positioning of this knowledge.¹³

Objectives and Project Phases

This interdisciplinary project will build an experiential learning model that can be shared with others across campus. It will be conducted over three years with the ultimate goal of increasing the evaluation capacity (i.e., knowledge, leadership, skills) of students and community stakeholders to broadly impact the health and social sectors. Three objectives will be accomplished across two phases: (1) develop and pilot the *UEval Summer Institute*, (2) evaluate and refine the *UEval Summer Institute*, and (3) share and sustain the *UEval Summer Institute*.

Phase 1 – Develop and Pilot *UEval* (18 months, April 2018 – September 2019)

Development. Objective 1 will be accomplished in three sequential steps. First, we will bring our collaborative together through a *UEval* learning advisory committee. The committee will meet bimonthly to oversee the development, student recruitment, pilot, and refinement of the *UEval Summer Institute*. Second, we will conduct an environmental scan of best practices and learning resources in evaluation capacity building. We will draw on faculty that currently teach evaluation-based courses at the University of Alberta and the University of Manitoba, and the Consortium of Universities for Evaluation Education (CUEE) that shares curriculum resources from other institutions across Canada. Third, we will create the course structure and content using information gathered through the environmental scan. We will build out the course infrastructure that will be required to grant credit to students across various disciplines on campus. Building on the successful summer institute offered at the University of Manitoba (Mignone et al., in press), we anticipate the week long intensive to be a blend of learning opportunities for all students, beginner and advanced skills based learning tailored to the diversity of learners, and facilitated team-based work on case studies (see Appendix A for a mockup of *UEval*). The PI will be the lead instructor; Co-I's may take on teaching and facilitation roles.

Pilot. The *UEval Summer Institute* will be piloted in summer 2019. We will recruit an equal number of undergraduate, graduate and community learners for an initial enrollment of 60 participants. Community learners will be asked to submit cases (projects, programs) that require the development of an evaluation framework. These cases will form the basis for the team-based work and final outputs. We will also recruit up to five advanced graduate students that have taken a graduate level evaluation course (e.g., EDPY 615, SPH 504) as facilitators during the

UEval. They will participate in a 1-day workshop prior to the institute on facilitation, leadership, conflict resolution, and supporting community-university partnerships. We will kick off the *Summer Institute* with a public lecture from an expert (e.g., Mark Cabaj, Michael Quinn Patton, Steve Patty), which will be of interest and draw from across the University and the broader community (approx. 150 participants). All individuals that participate in the *UEval* will be invited to join an online network (community of practice) to increase dialogue and continued communication during and beyond the summer institute.

Phase 2 – Refine, Revise, and Sustain (18 months, October 2019 – April 2021)

Refine. We will refine the *UEval* based on our evaluation (see evaluation section) findings. The data collected will be analyzed and shared with the learning advisory committee. The committee will support recommendations for refining the *UEval* for offering in June 2020. We will also share the learning's from the pilot offering of *UEval* with current collaborators, and other faculties and departments across campus to gain interest, connect with their learners, and work towards integrating the curriculum into the University structure. **Revise *UEval*.** We will implement the refined *UEval* with a new cohort of participants in June 2020 following a similar process outlined in Phase 1. **Sustain.** Although we are working towards sustainability the entire time by leveraging resources and partnerships across our community-university networks, we will spend the final year of the project ensuring that we have integrated the *UEval* into the University infrastructure. This will include linking the experiential learning model to several existing programs that it may complement across campus.

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