

Teaching Philosophy

The teaching philosophy that guides us in this course revolves around the students. The whole point of the Community Based Applied Interdisciplinary Research course (CBAIR) is to provide students with a unique experience, an opportunity to gain and practice their skills. It is a growth process: an opportunity to get real life experience by working with community members. We approach CBAIR from the perspective that the course is not so much about us teaching as it is about our students learning. Additionally, we believe that “learning” should involve the whole person therefore “teaching” must similarly address the whole person. This perspective informs our pedagogy which, in turn, informs our teaching strategies, actions, judgments and decisions: we take into consideration an understanding of our students, their needs and their individual backgrounds and interests. As a result, we continuously revise and re-shape the course even as it is being delivered. To apply our teaching philosophy, we have developed three goals: experiential learning, student empowerment and student growth. These goals are the foundation upon which CBAIR is built.

Experiential learning (in a community-based setting)

CBAIR is experiential learning in a community-based setting. This course offers students the opportunity to work for a community organisation by conducting social research that makes a tangible contribution to the community. Students work for a real client, a real community organization, looking at a real problem, and producing real results and recommendations.

Student empowerment

This is a student-led course, it is not taught in the traditional way with weekly classes filled with lectures and tests. Instead, students shape the course to meet their learning needs while completing the project. In this view, students determine the rules of conduct for the semester when they prepare “Team Charters”. Also, we do not schedule lectures: students decide if they need a lecture. For example, students in the past have asked for a lecture on qualitative or quantitative data analysis. Although we supervise and direct the projects, we do not tell students how to conduct their research: structure, methodology, design and timelines are in the hands of the students. At our weekly “round-table” meetings students present progress reports to the instructors and the other teams. This provides context for accountability and helps everyone stay on track. It is also an opportunity to discuss and troubleshoot any issues that may arise.

Student growth

At the end of both semesters, students write a “personal reflective paper”, where they look back on the semester and evaluate their challenges and successes. In our evaluation of these assignments, we look for evidence of self-reflection and whether

one's team members align with an individual's perception of their own behaviour. We are always amazed to see how much students learn about themselves through the CBAIR experience. For example, some students who thought they would dislike working in a team come to enjoy it; and some who thought they could not be leaders realize that they are holding the team together.