Research Article

# *Canadian Communication Studies and Experiential Learning*

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## Abstract

In this article, I provide an environmental scan of experiential learning (EL) activities – internships, community engaged learning, co-ops, and practicum placements – offered by Canadian communication / media studies programs. These forms of 'hands-on' pedagogy can provide students with an opportunity to put their academic training into practice, to gain 'in the field' experience, and to collaborate with myriad community partners. However, the growth of EL must be contextualized within the neoliberalization of higher education in Canada, including concerns that universities are being cultivated as utilitarian conduits for job preparedness in a capitalist society. With the demand for EL opportunities unlikely to diminish, I argue that our field needs to proactively engage in determining the future of this form of pedagogy and ensure that it is ethical for all involved in the process. This discussion is informed by anonymous, semi-structured interviews I conducted with faculty, staff, students, and community partners associated with a selection of communication / media studies programs in three Canadian provinces. Further, I highlight recent shifts that have taken place in Ontario vis-à-vis EL as a case study to demonstrate the fast and furious policy changes underway at a provincial level.

## Introduction

In Canada, universities are facing mounting pressure from provincial governments to provide students with out-of-classroom, hands-on experience. To encourage publicly funded post-secondary institutions to expand their experiential learning (EL) endeavours, provincial

ministries are increasingly tying educational funding to the size and scope of these pedagogical opportunities. Ministries are also starting to demand metrics-based evidence of EL outcomes. As a result, work-integrated learning (WIL) in the form of internships, co-ops, and practicum placements, as well as community engaged learning (CEL) with myriad local, national, and international partners, are on the rise throughout the country.

The growth of EL must, however, be contextualized within the shifting nature of Canadian higher education, which has become increasingly corporatized, managerial, and pressured to demonstrate fiscal solvency and societal relevance (Brownlee, 2016; Giroux, 2015; Giroux, Karmis, & Rouillard, 2015; Newfield, 2016; Turk, 2014, 2017). Although university administrations are keen to demonstrate their respective institution's societal relevance and commitment to communities beyond the 'ivory tower', rhetoric has not been matched with the financial and human resources necessary to support the labour-intensive nature of EL activities (Alperin et al., 2018; Ayala et al., 2018; Barreno et al., 2013, p. 5; Elliott, 2017; Randall, 2010; Wenger, Hawkins, and Seifer, 2012).

The growth trajectory of EL is especially important to the field of communications. At the time of writing, 25 of the 34 communication/media studies programs in Canada explicitly offer some type of undergraduate- and/or graduate-level curricular EL, impacting thousands of students and hundreds of private, non-profit, and public-sector partners. Nevertheless, these programs are, for the most part, developing and operationalizing their EL models in isolation from one another, with little to no discussion of best practices, challenges, and strategies to facilitate ethical and effective outcomes for both students and external partners. There has been even less discussion of CEL, a collaborative experience undertaken with a community partner for mutually beneficial outcomes (see Van Styvendale, McDonald, & Buhler, S., 2018). The paucity of interest in CEL is, I believe, particularly notable given that Canadian communications has a long history of being critical, policy-oriented, and geared towards fomenting social justice (Babe, 2000; Hamilton, 2009).

With the demand for EL opportunities unlikely to diminish, there is a need for in-depth inquiry into the theory and practice of this pedagogical process. To this end, the objectives of this article are fourfold: First, based on publicly available information gathered from

institutional websites, I provide an environmental scan of the current state of EL in Canadian communication studies. Second, drawing on Ontario as my case study, I describe changes currently underway at the provincial government level to expand EL in publicly funded post-secondary institutions. Third, I examine key issues at stake for communication-oriented EL. This analysis is informed by anonymous, semi-structured interviews conducted with communication faculty, staff, and students from eight Canadian universities, as well as with a selection of community partners who have collaborated with communication programs. Fourth, I argue that our field needs to pay greater attention to EL and must be actively involved in how it transpires within our departments, faculties, institutions, provinces, and communities.

I approach these objectives from two pedagogical vantage points. First, over the last 15 years as a faculty member at Western University, I have coordinated and supervised approximately 115 placements with local non-profit, non-governmental, and community-based organizations (NPOs, NGOs, and CBOs, respectively). These placements, which are the fourth-year capstone for the Media and the Public Interest (MPI) program in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, are for-credit, are not financially remunerated, and their goal is, in some manner, to advance the public good. My perspectives on EL are also influenced by my experience serving as an academic supervisor for approximately 200 internships with the private sector, and through organizing and supervising 19 placements in Southeast Asia with organizations dedicated to promoting freedom of expression. Second, I am a Teaching Fellow at Western with a focus on EL. As part of my Fellowship, I serve on the university's EL Taskforce and on its subcommittee to develop institution-wide EL principles and definitions.

## Fast and Furious in Ontario: EL Policies, Mandates, and Funding

Over the past decade, EL has expanded rapidly throughout Canada's university system (de Peuter, Cohen, & Brophy, 2015; Elliott, 2017; Universities Canada, 2017; Welch, 2016). However, there are significant differences in how these experiences are defined between, and often even within, institutions of higher education (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2015; Waddell, 2015; see also the definitional rubrics of Brock University [2016], Queen's University [2015], Ryerson University [2017], and the University of Victoria

[2014]). The terrain is further complicated by the fact that each province has its own mechanisms to advance post-secondary EL, as well as its own standards of "employment, health & safety and human rights applicable to interns" (Canadian Intern Association, 2017). For the discussion that follows, I draw on examples of policy and funding mechanisms currently in development by the Ontario government.

Home to 21 publicly assisted universities, Ontario's institutions of higher education educate 43% of Canada's university students (both domestic and foreign) (Council of Ontario Universities, 2017). In 2015, the government asked for a report from the Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel to "develop a strategy to help the province's current and future workforce adapt to the demands of a technology-driven knowledge economy" (Ontario, 2017a). From this report, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) (formerly the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, MAESD), which oversees education for Ontario, developed a set of EL Guiding Principles (MAESD, 2017a). These principles, not surprisingly, emphasize private-sector WIL in the form of internships, co-ops, and practicum placements designed to prepare students for the labour force post-graduation. More recently, the Ministry has expanded its notion of EL slightly to include CEL, recognizing the importance of civic-oriented skills for life writ large. The focus remains though on WIL activities, which are expected to play a central role in the Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) negotiated every three years between the province and publicly assisted colleges and universities (Ontario, 2017b). Concomitantly, MTCU will request (or perhaps mandate) that all undergraduate and graduate students, regardless of discipline, be guaranteed at least one EL opportunity during their degree.

To support this EL expansion, in October 2017, the Ministry announced three streams of Career Ready Funding with less than a month turnaround time for submissions (MAESD, 2017b). And, in conjunction with the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), it created 12 pilot projects led by a select number of universities working collaboratively to determine methods for tracking and evaluating EL activities. Project results were delivered to the COU in October 2018, and institutions have been given an April 2019 deadline to report back to the Ministry about their Career Ready Funding outcomes. In spring 2019, the Ministry will also introduce four broad EL typology categories based on the Guiding Principles noted above. Although

Ministry representatives have indicated that institutions can create their own EL definitions and descriptions, universities will nevertheless be expected to submit activity reports according to these typology buckets. Presumably, the categories will be used to evaluate and thus compare institutional success, but it remains unclear what this means in terms of future funding. I suspect that most universities will create internal EL categories, definitions, and tracking mechanisms alongside MTCU-friendly language that is incorporated into their respective SMAs and Ministry reporting documents.

For the 15 communication programs in Ontario, changes to the government's EL policies and funding mechanisms may directly impact their curriculum and human resource allocations, and should instigate more in-depth discussions about whether and how programs mount various types of EL. The key take-away message here is that pressure to incorporate EL into higher education is coming down the pipe fast and furious in Ontario, and the scenario is likely to become increasingly neoliberal in both form and content under the newly elected (2018) provincial government. Indeed, the manner in which EL is being advanced as a vehicle for training students for the workforce post-graduation is not only problematic, it is antithetical to the core mission of the academy (see de Peuter, Cohen, & Brophy, 2015; Hope & Figiel, 2015; Ip, 2015; Urciuoli, 2018). I thus argue that faculty, students, staff, and community partners, rather than bureaucrats and administrators, should be the architects of this form of pedagogy.

## Canadian Communication/media studies & EL

To date, university-based EL has received relatively little scholarly attention by communication studies scholars, especially in Canada. Notable exceptions include the critical work of Nicole Cohen, 2016; Nicole Cohen and Greig de Peuter, 2018; and Greig de Peuter, Nicole Cohen, and Enda Brophy, 2015, regarding the exploitation of Canadian interns in the creative industries post-graduation.[1] The relative dearth of interest in *curricular* EL is surprising given the growth in this type of pedagogy throughout Canada. As one faculty member interviewee remarked: "We're feeling a lot of pressure to do this… I think everyone

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1 See also the works of some key American scholars advancing communication research that foments social justice-oriented pedagogy: Barge, 2016; Carragee & Frey 2016; Frey & Palmer, 2017; Oster-Aaland et al, 2007; Rodino-Colocino, Lawrence, & Palmer, 2016.

is … so instead of doing it ad hoc, we need to do it on our own terms… by our own ethics. And we need to share resources. I don't mean sharing our lists of partners… but sharing our practices, our behind-the-scenes mechanisms… and we need to talk about how we want to move forward as a discipline."

Mounting ethical and effective communication-oriented EL is not, however, an easy task. Curricular EL that includes a placement outside the classroom should: benefit both students and, especially in the case of CEL, host partners; critically integrate theory with practice, which necessitates involvement of a faculty member in the pedagogical process; have a set and fair number of placement hours; provide students with appropriate course credit and/or financial remuneration; offer students an opportunity to engage in meaningful activities related to their curriculum; include active and continuous mentorship from both academic and host supervisors; and incorporate opportunities for authentic reflection (see, as examples, Clayton et al., 2014; Dolgon, Mitchell, & Eatman, 2017; Mitchell & Soria, 2016; Saltmarsh, Janke, & Clayton, 2015). Although programs strive to meet these criteria, as discussed below, they face challenges in the process.

### Secondary Research: Snapshot of the Landscape by the Numbers

*Methodology*

At the time of writing, there are 34 universities offering communication/media studies programs in Canada. These programs have different titles, reflecting their principal theoretical orientation(s), faculty complement, primary language of instruction, and the interdisciplinary nature of the field. For this secondary research, I surveyed programs' publicly available information about curricular EL with private, non-profit, and public entities.[2] I did not include stand-alone journalism programs or information schools, which *tend* to have more of a professional orientation and thus a different approach to EL.

I began the search at the department/school/program level, and worked my way outwards to the faculty and then to the

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[2] This research was conducted with the assistance of three graduate students in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western: Darryl Pieber, Charlotte Panneton, and Mason Brooks.

institutional/university level. The objective was to capture any public-facing information about the form and content of undergraduate and graduate EL including, but not limited to: personnel responsible for coordinating and supervising EL; number of in-class and placement hours; number of participating students; type/quantity of academic credit and/or financial remuneration; academic prerequisites; theoretical and reflection components; evaluation criteria and mechanisms; and types and/or examples of private, non-profit, and public partners. This process was remarkably time-consuming as information was typically located on different institutional websites; terminology, definitions, and descriptions are unique at each locale; and while some programs actively promote their EL activities, others offer little material online.

Of the 34 programs, 24 explicitly offer some form of EL: 19 at the undergraduate level, one at the graduate level, and six at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Further, of these 24 programs, six state that they have undergraduate CEL, half of which classify this pedagogical approach in its own separate category but refer to it by a different name – the MPI program at Western, for instance, currently refers to the fourth-year, community-oriented capstone as a 'practicum placement'.

There are, however, three important caveats to these numbers. First, the programs offering EL tend to have a larger cohort of undergraduate students than many other Canadian programs, which means that thousands of students in our field are involved in EL activities. Second, even if programs themselves do not offer EL, most appear to allow their students to indirectly participate in some form of EL through an institutional office with little to no involvement by the home unit. Third, it is difficult to discern whether and how many programs offer CEL because placements with NPOs, NGOs, and CBOs are usually included under the auspices of other forms of EL. This conflation of EL activities, which I discovered during interviews with faculty and staff (described below), tells us that the pedagogical framework and overall orientation of some community-based placements are similar to, if not the same as, internships with the private sector (e.g., in terms of coursework requirements, number of placement hours, type of supervision, reflection components). Additionally, the secondary research did not reveal any restrictions (other than the prerequisites one would expect, such as a minimum grade point average) placed on communication studies students

wanting to participate in co-curricular EL coordinated by a central institutional office (e.g., Alternative Spring Break with Habitat for Humanity).

**EL Themes & Trends**

From this bird's eye view of the Canadian communication studies landscape, several themes emerged. First, except for co-ops, which are almost exclusively full-time and paid, most EL placements are unpaid, for-credit, and part-time over the course of one semester. However, the number of publicly listed required hours for these courses differ between institutions, ranging from 40 to 140 hours in a semester. These numbers do not though tell us how many hours are earmarked for the actual placements versus the time allotted for classroom discussion, the hours devoted to supervisor meetings, or the time writing reflective journals, reports, and essays.

Second, in comparison to short- and long-term internships and co-ops, which are often administered by staff members at a broader faculty or institutional level, students participating in CEL typically have more contact with a faculty member throughout the duration of their course. These courses also tend to have more robust reflection requirements and clearer expectations of integrating communication theory with 'hands-on' practice.

Third, undergraduate students are generally permitted to participate in EL only during the upper years of their degree, and eligibility is subject to minimum grade requirements.

Fourth, the Canadian communication studies landscape is just beginning to see the introduction of EL at a graduate level. Currently, most programs allow their graduate students to complete co-ops via a staff-managed, institutional-level office that liaises with a local faculty member. Increasingly, however, communication programs themselves are getting more involved in coordinating graduate EL. According to some faculty member interviewees, these nascent initiatives are a direct result of fewer secure positions being available in the academy, and programs are increasingly feeling a moral obligation to assist graduates in finding alternative forms of employment. This fourth trend demonstrates the value of talking directly with EL stakeholders to gain insight into the behind-the-scenes practices, issues, and mechanisms that are not made public.

**Key Findings from Primary Research**

To supplement the secondary research, I interviewed a range of individuals in the Canadian communication studies community. The goal of this primary research was to capture first-hand perspectives from individuals who facilitate, participate in, and host EL for communication students. To this end, I conducted anonymous, semi-structured interviews with 16 faculty members, two staff members, two mid-level university administrators, representatives from four NPOs that have hosted students, and seven former undergraduate students who have completed local and/or international placements. These interviews, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, took place in 2014, 2015 (see Smeltzer, 2015) and 2017. Faculty members, staff members, and administrators were contacted via publicly available email addresses from eight universities in Canada. Faculty members then identified former students from their respective programs who had completed an EL placement, as well as local organizations who could speak to their experiences 'hosting' a communications student.[3] To capture a range of perspectives, I chose a sample of small and large programs (in terms of student population and faculty complement), located in mid-sized cities and large metropolises in four different provinces.

Given that the interviewees for this pilot project research represent a convenience sampling, the results cannot be generalizable to the wider communications community in Canada. However, the project highlighted five key themes for our field: 1) Models of EL vary between communication programs and there is little common ground in terms of descriptions or definitions, and in how and by whom these pedagogical activities are facilitated; 2) Programs struggle with limited human and financial resources to ensure placements are meaningful, theory-oriented, and valuable to students; 3) Faculty members want mechanisms to share best practices and to discuss challenges with other communication colleagues and with peers from other disciplines; 4) Faculty, staff, and administrators want data to recognize labour commitments, as well as methods to track and assess placement outcomes; and 5) Programs are developing their EL endeavours in isolation from one another, not knowing what competitors offer. Yet, faculty and staff interviewees maintained that

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[3] In both cases, individuals were given my contact information if they wished to participate in the research.

offering prospective students EL opportunities was critical to their recruitment efforts. In addition to these five themes, five points of considerable contention regarding EL surfaced during this primary research that deserve elaboration.

*Issue #1: The academic mission of universities and student labour*

Most faculty member interviewees said they felt significant pressure from upper administration at their institution to offer EL, as well as a growing demand from students to provide 'real life' opportunities. Both faculty and staff members also noted a perceived increase over the past several years in the number of parents of incoming students asking about internship possibilities for their child, concerned about what job opportunities lay ahead for a communication studies graduate. For many interviewees, this pressure from different quarters calls into question the fundamental academic mission of the university.

On the one hand, EL can provide students with hands-on experience, more in-depth and nuanced understanding of their field, an opportunity to put their theoretical training into practice, a chance to work alongside a given community at home or abroad, and skills to support their post-graduation transition into an evolving society. These experiences can be especially advantageous for students without the financial/class privilege or connections that open doors to employment opportunities. Moreover, students usually receive course credit as a form of remuneration for their labour, and if their experiences are interwoven with curricular content and informed by intentional self-reflection, then EL can be intellectually, personally, and professionally beneficial.

On the other hand, there are serious concerns that universities are increasingly being viewed as utilitarian conduits for job preparedness in a capitalist society, and that any type of EL, including CEL, feeds into this mentality. Moreover, some interviewees expressed alarm that educational institutions may be complicit in allowing private sector entities to engage in exploitive labour practices, and that NPOS and public agencies benefit from students and recent graduates who are struggling to find employment in an increasingly competitive job market. Moreover, EL can further encourage students to produce themselves as neoliberal subjects. As Raddon and Harrison (2015) describe, pressure exerted by parents, peers, universities, the media, and the labour market impels students "to acquire more credentials

and make themselves more marketable" (140), and an internship or co-op placement manifests as a valuable line on one's resume (see also Ip, 2015; Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2013; Shade & Jacobson, 2015). Some interviewees maintained that students are also being conditioned to see themselves as precarious workers; to accept that unpaid work is a necessary stepping stone to 'real' employment; and that their employability in the future rests on their ability to be flexible, adaptable, and, unfortunately, exploitable (see Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Hope & Figiel, 2015; Ip, 2015).

A key difficulty then lies in trying to strike a balance between ensuring that a student learns, grows, and contributes in a meaningful way during their placement – which is usually relatively short in duration – without replacing the job of an existing or would-be employee (see Acker & Wagner, 2017; Chertkovskaya et al., 2013; Christou, 2016; Darby, Ward-Johnson, & Cobb, 2016; de Peuter, Cohen, & Brophy, 2015; Discenna, 2016; Gray, Heffernan, & Norton, 2010; Green & Johnson, 2014; Larsen, 2015; Mountz et al., 2015; Nussbaum, 2016; Post et al., 2016; Jeppesen et al, 2017; Neff, 2011; Perlin, 2011). Further, if a student completes a CEL placement with an NPO, NGO, or CBO, concerns have been raised that they pay tuition fees to be allowed to work in the community without financial compensation (e.g., Discenna 2016; Neff, 2011; Perlin, 2011; Rodino-Colocino, 2012; Smeltzer, 2015; Smith, 2007; Standing, 2014). Yet, almost all the organizations I collaborate with simply do not have the resources to pay our students. Do, then, the intellectual, academic, personal, and professional benefits of participating in these placements offset some expectation of financial remuneration? Arguably, yes. However, CEL can be messy, complex, and, as discussed in the next section, placements do not always transpire as expected.

*Issue #2: CEL and community labour*

CEL is an educational approach that integrates community engagement with reflective learning; the overarching objective is for students to engage in a project, developed in conjunction with a community partner, that has mutually beneficial outcomes. In this regard, community partners are viewed as collaborators and co-educators in the pedagogical process. However, faculty interviewees said that many of their students, colleagues, and institutional administrators perceive CEL in a more traditional manner, one that reflects a service learning model that reinforces a so-called town-and-gown divide. This latter approach: 1) views CEL as a unidirectional

undertaking in which students 'serve' others beyond the campus; 2) does not fully recognize the time, energy, and resources community partners – who are often facing budget cuts under conditions of neoliberal austerity – dedicate to supporting, mentoring, and co-educating students; and 3) assumes that the benefits accruing to community partners outweighs their investment in the process (Brown & Bruce, 2010, 1012; Mitchell, 2008; Porfilio & Hickman, 2011; Taylor, 2017).

Further, as I have discussed elsewhere (Smeltzer, 2015), universities usually want attention to be focused on non-disruptive forms of engagement that demonstrate their commitment to 'the community' without jeopardizing their reputation or their relationship with donors and sponsors (see also Cruz, 2017: 40). Raddon & Harrison (2015) refer to this as the "kind face" of the academy – a "'good-washing' of universities' public image [that] deflects and defuses negative responses to the basic problem of underfunding of undergraduate teaching and, more generally, to the neo-liberal realignment of the purpose and priorities of post-secondary education in society" (142; see also Taylor and Kahlke, 2017).

There is though a growing body of literature arguing that students who want to pursue social justice should be allowed to partake in placements that move beyond incremental changes to the existing political and economic framework, and instead actively challenge the status quo (e.g., Mitchell, 2008, p. 50; Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Bruce & Brown, 2010; Vogelgesang & Rhoads, 2003; Taylor and Kahlke, 2017). These kinds of placements could be undertaken by communication students with myriad social justice-oriented networks, coalitions, collectives, and movements. When I asked how their program would respond to such a request from one of their students, faculty interviewees across the board responded positively, but staff members expressed uncertainty regarding how they would proceed. However, both faculty and staff interviewees equally stressed the overriding imperative of safeguarding students' safety and of ensuring that placements have the capacity to provide students with appropriate mentorship and support.

Unexpectedly, none of the faculty and staff interviewees said that their program had (that they know of) codified policies to determine the suitability of EL placements. Most said their program had loose or ad hoc vetting criteria; for instance, a host supervisor

could not be a recent graduate of the program or a family member of the student, but none had criteria regarding how embodied versus how virtual a placement could be, an issue that is becoming increasingly relevant for communication students engaging in activities such as social media outreach. Of particular relevance to this discussion, faculty and staff revealed deep ambivalence regarding how communication programs should decide whether a placement is morally and politically appropriate. When asked how their program would ascertain if a student could participate in a placement with an organization whose mandate runs counter to their academic supervisor's conceptualization of the progressive public good (e.g., in an anti-environmental movement or pro-life organization), no interviewees can say with certainty how their program would come to a decision.

*Issue #3: Praxis disconnect*

All of the interviewees in my primary research commented that they see a disconnect between the theoretical orientation of communication studies programs and the activities students often engage in during an EL experience. The theoretically driven, critical orientation of our field in Canada butts up against the more hands-on skillset non-profit, private, and public partners, quite understandably, expect students from a communication studies program to bring with them into their placement. While many students may possess these capabilities, they have not usually been taught them in their degree program and expectations of such technological know-how feed into myths of the 'digital native' (Bullen & Morgan, 2015; Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017). As one faculty member commented in our interview: "I think a lot of places expect that our students are going to come in and whip up a social media campaign for their organization, or build them a website... which is clearly not what they're in our program... our theoretical program... for." None of the interviewees had clear suggestions for how to bridge this divide, other than to emphasize the importance of collaboratively determining mutually beneficial objectives for the student and host organization at the outset of the placement, as well as the importance of maintaining regular contact with all parties involved to ensure these objectives are being met. Additionally, some interviewees noted their discomfort with the incongruity between their program's critical curriculum and its EL activities. These sentiments reflect de Peuter, Cohen, and Brophy's (2015) concern that what makes our field unique is that our academic

orientation is "often devoted to scrutinizing the institutional structures, social implications, and symbolic products of the very industries that are routinely singled out as playing a key role in recruiting and normalizing unpaid or low-paid intern labour" (330).

*Issue #4: Institutional labour*

Every faculty member interviewed for this research was very clear that their institution's upper administration – and some of their colleagues – were unfamiliar with the labour required to coordinate and supervise EL experiences (see also Taylor, 2017: 263). They expressed frustration that co-workers were largely unaware of the different forms that EL can take (i.e. beyond exploitative internships with the private sector); of the potential pedagogical benefits of critically marrying theory and practice; or of the time and energy needed to guide students through focused and authentic reflection (Mitchell et al., 2015). For CEL, additional labour is required to build a relationship with a community partner, and to support students who may bear witness to various forms of inequity and marginalization during their placement. Many of the communication-oriented placements I coordinate are the first time students have been up close with systematic and systemic injustice, and can be easily overwhelmed by the experience. Moreover, the placement is often their first time witnessing the interworking of an organization dedicated to advancing the public good. I find that students are surprised and often quite dismayed to witness the political nature of many NPOs, NGOs, and CBOs, as well as the difficulties organizations face in trying to fulfil their public interest mandates with scarce resources, and the limited physical space available for them to work during their placement. For all these (and other) reasons, supervisors must take seriously a range of physical, intellectual, emotional, and mental health issues students may experience in order to ensure they receive appropriate support before, during, and after a placement (Tiessen & Huish, 2014). These requirements demand a significant outlay of time and energy; yet, in the face of deepening budget cuts throughout Canadian higher education (Bradshaw, 2017), most programs simply do not have the resources to fulfil these obligations.

Also, to be candid, participation in EL activities usually does not help tenure-track hopefuls secure a permanent position, nor is it usually recognized by the traditional performance evaluations of tenured faculty members. Indeed, as Alan H. Bloomgarden (2017) makes clear, "faculty colleagues who undertake this work are often

unrewarded or at least under-valued for their efforts" (p. 21; see also Doberneck, 2016; Gelmon, Jordan, & Seifer, 2013; Kajner, 2015).

*Issue #5: Precarious labour*

Some of the faculty member interviewees expressed concern that EL activities at their institution are facilitated by either a staff member unfamiliar with communication theory, or by a part-time, adjunct communication studies faculty member. Given the amount of labour required to coordinate and supervise EL, combined with the under-valued nature of this work, we must be diligent in protecting precariously employed labour. As one tenured faculty member averred: "Precarious labour has taken on the extra workload that needs to be done to make these types of placements actually work… and to seem even more 'valuable' to the department… but they're used by the department because they are, quite frankly, cheaper… which clearly isn't fair."

As a salient case in point, I recently co-organized a university-wide workshop about CEL at Western. We invited three faculty members from various disciplines, who are at different points in their careers, to speak about their EL journey. These award-winning educators all said that the amount of work they dedicate to EL activities heavily outweighs that of a 'regular' course. One of the speakers stressed to the audience that engaging in EL can be especially difficult for precariously employed faculty because of this workload, and can be risky if they work with counter-hegemonic organizations that challenge the political and economic status quo (see Breunig, 2017: 14). Thus, the extra workload of EL, combined with concerns about job security, can make this educational approach particularly daunting for labour not privy to tenure protection.

Importantly, staff members can also find themselves in a difficult situation if they are expected to evaluate students' academic performance, specially if they do not have a background in communication studies. As well, some may not feel they have the power to voice concerns about specific placements or to suggest more substantial changes to EL processes in their home unit. As one staff member commented in our interview, "I can't really call out things that are kinda problems… like when a supervisor isn't all that helpful or really around, but they're from x organization that lots of students want placements with…" The voices of these individuals, who play a

central role in facilitating university-based EL, are sorely under-represented in the literature (see Taylor, 2017).

## Why EL Matters to our Field

In addition to the issues raised above, myriad other concerns deserve more fulsome discussion (e.g. gender issues; various forms of marginalization that impact the accessibility of EL participation). For future research, our SSHRC team intends to more fully include the voices of staff, as well as of undergraduate *and* graduate students (see Bowen, 2016; Breunig, 2017; Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Hartman & Kiely, 2014), of a broader range of community partners, and of precarious labour (see Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015; McCunney, 2017; Patrick et al., 2009). Conducting more in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with these sets of individuals will help communication studies programs to identify best practices, common issues of concern, and methods of assessing EL outcomes that are relevant to our field. Epistemologically, we hope that this research will offer further insights into our communicative world and reveal what new understandings of the discipline students and faculty gain from engaging in this form of theory-practice pedagogy.

As this article illustrates, there are weighty issues at stake that merit significantly more attention from our field. We cannot pretend that EL will not play an increasingly central role in our corporatized institutes of higher education. We therefore need to proactively engage in open and honest discussions to ensure that this form of pedagogy is ethical for all involved in the process. Given that EL in Canada is not (yet) as institutionalized as it is the United States (Taylor, 2017: 259), we have an opening to chart the course for how we operationalize it both in and beyond our field.

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