

SHORT-TERM FEEDBACK ON 2008 ECOHEALTH SHORT COURSE

(designed and delivered by CoPEH- Canada, hosted at UBC, Vancouver)

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



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1. CONTEXT AND APPROACH

The 2008 Community of Practice in Ecosystem Approaches to Health (CoPEH-Canada) Ecohealth Training and Awards Program drew on collaborative learning principles to deliver a short course, manage a student awards program and develop a community of practice. A diverse group of post graduate students, instructors, staff, consultants and community members convened at the University of British Columbia for a dynamic two weeks of learning and exchange from August 5-15, 2008.

The course catalyzed many ongoing processes which will feed into the emerging Community of Practice, including an integrated program of participatory research and evaluation. Two months post course, the CoPEH-Canada managing team sought short-term feedback on the 2008 Ecohealth short course by asking students and core team members to complete an online survey. Participants were asked to share their impressions of the course via qualitative (open ended) questions and quantitative (likert scale) course evaluation questions [see Appendix 1].

2. FINDINGS

The survey received a response rate of 95%, based on responses from 20 of 22 students, and all 15 team members. A summary of student responses to quantitative course evaluation questions provides an overview of the impressions of the course [see Appendix 2]. Notable positive reactions (those who Agreed and Strongly Agreed) include 100% of respondents who affirmed that the CoPEH-Canada team helped inspire interest in learning about an ecosystem approach (n=18). Similarly, 100% reported that they would recommend the course to others and that they found the course worthwhile overall (n=19). Other responses identified areas for improvement. For example, when asked whether the CoPEH-Canada team made it clear what the students were to learn, 39% gave a neutral response and 6% disagreed. When asked whether the course helped to fulfill personal learning objectives, 28% of students gave a neutral response and 6% disagreed.

More nuanced feedback was gained from open-ended survey questions. For example, when the course objectives were stated as part of open ended questions, responses provides a positive impression and identified a range of specific ways that the course realized each of the five learning objectives [see Appendix 3]. The team noted interesting contrasts between these open ended responses and the quantitative questions relating to course objectives.

Responses regarding collaborative learning and sharing, working definitions of key concepts, and the IDRC's three pillars of the Ecosystem Approach to Health were notable for the amount and depth of feedback and an overall affirmative tone (course objectives 1, 2 and 3). Responses concerning the role of research and reflective practice were weaker in terms of response rate and depth of feedback (course objectives 4 and 5).

Analysis of the open-ended questions as a whole identified informative tensions. On one hand, participants expressed **enthusiasm** about and **commitment** to collaborative learning and sharing in and beyond the course. On the other hand, the responses provided insights into the **concerns** and **challenges** that arise when incorporating these theoretical foundations and skills into specific research projects and practice.

Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis of responses from **students** and **team** to open-ended questions; they are summarized below. Each of the interrelated themes provides productive

reflections on the impacts of a course that sought to ‘train’ course participants in an approach with a range of potential application in research and practice, while also modeling the ecohealth approach in the ‘practice’ of course design and teaching. A more detailed overview of open-ended survey responses is compiled in Appendix 3.

2.1. Collaborative Learning and Working: Collaborative learning during the course was most often related to small group work during the two “learning scenarios” and group discussions, but also to non-traditional learning environments and hands on activities (e.g. First Nations House of Learning, UBC Farm, Rhizome Café, outside, field trips, etc.). Informal learning through socializing was identified as an example of collaborative learning that helps to cross boundaries between different disciplines and backgrounds. Critiques of overly didactic pedagogy were interpreted as a desire for increased opportunities for interactive and collaborative learning opportunities.

The link between the collaborative learning pedagogy of the course and collaborative research or practice beyond the course emerged from responses addressing course pedagogy, the IDRC pillars and the emerging community of practice, which combined to make it the strongest and most oft cited theme. Respondents identified transdisciplinarity, multistakeholder participation, collaborative learning and the emerging community of practice as interdependent, complementary manifestations of a collaborative pedagogy, with application within and beyond the CoPEH-Canada. Collaboration was described in relation to – and in dynamic interaction with – the three pillars of “transdisciplinarity”, “participation” (including research with multiple stakeholders), and “equity”. Many respondents commented that the IDRC pillar of gender and social equity could be more thoroughly developed during the course. Several respondents also advocated more sustained multistakeholder participation in the course, especially from outside the academy.

2.2 Critical thinking about Ecohealth: In keeping with a general critique about didactic teaching and the potential for more student participation in aspects of course design, course participants also challenged the content (what was taught) of the course and its correlation to pedagogy (how it was taught). Some students were not content to learn about Ecosystem Approaches to Health and attendant case studies without a closer examination of the traditions, biases, assumptions and epistemologies which converge to form an ecohealth approach and perspective. Several students raised a critique of ecohealth’s underpinnings, raising deep concerns about application and practice, specifically on the relationships between the three pillars, the role of research and the challenges of collaboration and holism in complex, global systems.

...my most pressing questions... revolve around underlying assumptions behind Ecohealth projects, and participatory, ecological, equity-conscious development work more generally... do Ecohealth projects ultimately run up against broader structural constraints to health and sustainability (for example, unjust national debts and international trade regimes)? And if so, what is the role of the Ecohealth researcher: to comment on the difficulties of bringing about real change, to claim that community empowerment is one small step on the road to addressing these broader structural issues, or to widen the scale of engagement to addressing those macro-level constraints? Student

2.3 Hopes and concerns about application: Students expressed strong concerns about “how to do” Ecohealth. Many students expressed a tension between the theoretical challenge and stimulation of the course and the issues of application they face with their own research projects. Recurring concerns ranged from how to use the concepts from the course in the face of institutional constraints and complex power dynamics, to confusion about how to work with diverse collaborators. Students advocated for more focus on skills development, concrete methods and strategies to relate course concepts to their own research. Beyond these concerns responses from students and team members clearly attributed their new or renewed interest in the varying forms of collaboration in their own research and practice to the collaborative and interactive pedagogy of the course.

A majority of students are hopeful they can incorporate ecohealth into their research and practice in the future while several students are actively seeking out new collaborations to contribute to their work.

This suggests a distinction between what students want as applicable course outcomes and how they view collaboration. When collaboration was described in relation to transdisciplinary work or with multiple stakeholders it did not appear to be viewed as a concrete skill or methodology. This could be because collaboration remains abstract for some students or because it is viewed as a common sense and straightforward addition to other methodologies and skills.

2.4 Cultivating integrated, holistic thinking: Respondents stressed a growing desire to be more holistic thinkers and practitioners. Responses in this category reflected a range of interest in integration across methodological, disciplinary and sectoral boundaries (especially in the fields of health and ecology), and increased emphasis on context and whole systems. These responses were often linked to reflections on methods and approaches participants would like to incorporate in their work and for some was linked to questioning basic assumptions about their research.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations summarise key lessons learned from the short-term feedback on the 2008 course and were shared with the team to inform future courses and CoPEH-Canada activities.

- Orient students to the type of “training”: Clearly emphasize that Ecosystem Approaches to Health are approaches which bring together several theoretical foundations and are informed by a range of methodologies. Conceptual work is therefore critical to Ecosystem Approaches to Health.
- Focus on bringing theory and practice together, especially by involving student research/projects throughout the entire course.
- Be clear about the skills and tools to which students will be introduced. Emphasize collaboration, reflection and integrative/holistic thinking as ‘research skills’ with important application to ecohealth work.
- Include more ‘how to?’ material, but reinforce that questions about ‘how-to’ should not be the starting point. Ecosystem Approaches to Health should consider methods and tools as one step embedded within the context of guiding research questions (What? Why? For and with whom? How? When/Where?).
- Consult students about how they perceive “application.” More reflection on this may help students demonstrate to each other what they are expecting and how to make it happen.
- Build in student participation early on at a decision making level. The course needs to model multi stakeholder participation. This is an especially critical aspect of building a Community of Practice.
- Be explicit about the origins and development of Ecosystem Approaches to Health. Involve students’ critical thinking to tease out the complementary strands of natural sciences, health sciences, social sciences and the humanities which provide the foundation for Ecosystem Approaches to Health.
- Listen and observe for critical, integrative and holistic thinking and acknowledge intentionality as well as action/outputs. Learning is very different from behavior modification.
- Reflect (team and students) on how community involvement within the course is illustrating the three pillars and collaborative learning and working.
- Cultivate substantial, enduring community involvement from outside the academy. Build in feedback loops between course participants and community participants.

The findings and recommendations from the short-term survey were explicitly integrated into the design and delivery of the 2009 Short Course hosted at the University of Guelph in July 2009, and will continue to inform the development of the CoPEH-Canada Training & Awards Program. The 2008 short-term survey findings also feed into a process of participatory research and evaluation that is an ongoing contribution to the development, collaborative relationships and capacity building activities of the CoPEH-Canada, including engagement of members and the planning of future courses and activities.

APPENDIX 1: Overview of the Short-term Survey sections and Appendices

Section	Type and Description of Question	Overview of questions & results
Section 1A: Five Learning Objectives (Q3-7)	<p>Open-ended questions based on five course objectives :</p> <p>At the end of the course students will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) practice collaborative learning and sharing in a defined ecohealth project using the guiding questions of What? Why? For/with whom? How? When/Where? (2) propose and justify their own working definition of the concepts 'health', 'knowledge', 'ecosystems', 'ecosystem approaches to health' and 'ecohealth' in a manner that reflects dynamic biogeophysical and social/cultural interrelationships. (3) analyse the relative roles of the three pillars (transdisciplinarity, multistakeholder participation and social/gender equity) in ecosystem approaches to health; (4) explain and critique the role of research in understanding complex systems; (5) develop their skills as reflective practitioners by reflecting on their experience, for example as learner in this course, comparing didactic, individual, case-based, field-based and team-based learning. 	→ See Appendix 3
Section 1B: General Feedback (Q8-14)	Open-ended questions adapted from "Common Questions on Student Evaluation of Teaching Forms", UBC Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth	→ See Appendix 3
Section 1C: Reflective Questions (Q15-17)	Open-ended questions adapted from final reflective journal questions	→ See Appendix 3
Section 2A: Course evaluation (Q18)	<p>Likert Scale questions adapted from</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) UBC Recommended 'University Module Items' for student evaluation of teaching (b) "Common Questions on Student Evaluation of Teaching Forms"; (c) Specific team queries. 	→ See Appendix 2
Section 2B: Evaluation of Collaborative Learning (Q19-21)	Adapted from questions used to assess Collaborative/ Interprofessional learning in the Interdisciplinary Health and Human Services series (IHHS) hosted by the UBC College of Health Disciplines	→ See Appendix 2
Section 3 (Q22)	Additional Comments	→ See Appendix 3

APPENDIX 2: Overview of student responses to course evaluation (likert scale) questions

Section 2A: Course evaluation							
Q18. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree, please indicate the most appropriate:	1	2	3	4	5	n* =	n/a
a) The CoPEH-Canada team helped inspire interest in learning about ecosystem approaches to health.	0%	0%	0%	11%	89%	18	0
b) The CoPEH-Canada team made it clear what students were expected to learn.	0%	6%	39%	39%	17%	18	0
c) The CoPEH-Canada team helped me to fulfill the course learning objectives	0%	0%	0%	50%	50%	18	0
d) My student peers helped me to fulfill the course learning objectives	0%	0%	11%	44%	44%	18	0
e) The community contributors helped me to fulfill the course learning objectives	0%	6%	6%	56%	33%	18	0
f) The course helped me to fulfill my personal learning objectives (stated in my pre-course introduction/bio)	0%	6%	28%	22%	44%	18	0
g) The CoPEH-Canada Team showed concern for student learning	0%	0%	6%	11%	83%	18	0
h) Student peers showed concern for each others learning	0%	0%	6%	47%	47%	17	0
i) The CoPEH-Canada team encouraged active participation by students	0%	0%	6%	44%	50%	18	0
j) CoPEH-Canada Team members were welcoming if or when I sought help or clarification	0%	0%	6%	11%	83%	18	0
k) The teamwork and assignments helped me to meet the course learning objectives.	0%	0%	22%	22%	56%	18	0
l) The team presentations helped me to meet the course learning objectives.	0%	0%	28%	33%	39%	18	0
m) The feedback on assignments helped me to meet the learning objectives.	6%	6%	6%	59%	24%	17	1
n) I felt that my contributions to the course were valued.	0%	6%	6%	44%	44%	18	0
o) The CoPEH-Canada team modeled collaborative practice	0%	0%	11%	44%	44%	18	0
p) Overall, I found the course worthwhile	0%	0%	0%	32%	68%	19	0
q) I would recommend this course to others	0%	0%	0%	32%	68%	19	0

* (n=) includes both non respondents and respondents who selected n/a in all following tables.

Section 2B: Evaluation of Collaborative Learning (Q19-21)						
Q19. Please rate how often this course provided you with opportunities to work with those from other disciplines and backgrounds. 1= Not at all, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4=Often	1	2	3	4	n =* [†]	n/a
(a) Identifying and defining problems.	0%	0%	28%	72%	18	0
(b) Planning joint solutions to the problems.	0%	0%	28%	72%	18	0
(c) Participating in joint solution of problems.	0%	0%	33%	56%	16	2
Q20. Please rate how often this course provided you with opportunities to learn. (1= Not at all, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4=Often)	1	2	3	4	n=	n/a
(a) ABOUT others' disciplines and backgrounds	0%	6%	72%	22%	18	0
(b) FROM those from other disciplines and backgrounds.	0%	6%	44%	50%	18	0
Q21. Compared to the beginning of the course, do you have better: (1= Not at all, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4=Often)	1	2	3	4	n=	n/a
(a) Knowledge and understanding of other disciplines' perspectives	0%	11%	78%	11%	18	0
(b) Ability to identify shared tasks that require joint solution?	0%	6%	44%	50%	18	0
(c) Skills for defining the problems from multiple perspectives?	0%	6%	44%	50%	18	0
(d) Skills of joint planning and decision-making with people from other disciplines and backgrounds?	0%	6%	67%	28%	18	0
(e) Skills for coordinating actions with others to pursue joint solutions to problems & challenges?	0%	17%	44%	39%	18	0

[†] Due to a minor typographical error in the survey design, Question 19 gave a different numerical scale from the other questions. Whereas the rest of the survey used '0 = non applicable', this section used '5 = non applicable.'

APPENDIX 3: Quantified summaries of student responses to open-ended questions

Section 1A: Five Learning Objectives (Q3-7) (students only)	
<p>Note that some participants responded at greater length than others. Some individual responses contained multiple points which were counted, i.e. the numbers below do not represent one response per participant. Therefore, not all responses will equal the numerator.</p>	
<p>Q3. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND SHARING: Do you consider that the course has given you practical and/or theoretical tools to help you practice collaborative learning and sharing in ecohealth projects (consider especially the guiding questions of What? Why? For/with whom? How? When? Where?)? If yes, how so? If no, what do you feel is missing?</p>	<p>Yes, 14 students/ No, 4 students (n=18)</p>
<p>Q4: WORKING DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS: Has the course helped you propose and justify your own working definition of the concepts 'health', 'knowledge', 'ecosystems', 'ecosystem approaches to health' and 'ecohealth' in a manner that reflects dynamic biogeophysical and social/cultural interrelationships. If yes, how so? If no, what do you feel is missing? If your definitions of key concepts changed because of the course, can you provide specific examples of how this occurred and whether it was useful?</p>	<p>Yes, 14 students/ No, 4 students (n=18)</p>
<p>Q5: THE THREE PILLARS: Has the course helped you getting a better grasp of the relative roles of the three pillars (transdisciplinarity, multistakeholder participation and social/gender equity) in ecosystem approaches to health? Please explain.</p>	<p>Better grasp: Yes, 11 students / Sort of, 2/ No, 2 students/ Discussion of the Relative roles: 3 (n=18) The pillars were differentially emphasized: Transdisciplinarity: 8 students found the course helped their understanding of this pillar while 2 wanted the course to model this better. Multistakeholder participation: 9 students found the course helped their understanding of this pillar while 1 wanted the course to model this better. Social and gender equity: 3 students found the course helped their understanding of this pillar while 3 found this pillar was not developed as thoroughly as the others.</p>
<p>Q6: THE ROLE OF RESEARCH: What has the course brought you in terms of your understanding of the role of research in understanding complex systems?</p>	<p>Students responded that they were using the three pillars (6), the necessity of collaboration (5), the distinction between complicated to complex (5), a holistic research approach (5) and solution oriented research (3) to understand the role of research in complex systems. (n=18)</p>
<p>Q7: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: Has the course helped you develop your skills as reflective practitioners? If yes, could you give some examples / areas in which the course has helped?</p>	<p>Yes, 11 students/ No, 3 students (n=14)</p>

Section 1B: General Feedback (Q8-14) (students only)

Note that some participants responded at greater length than others. Some responses contained multiple points, each of which were counted, i.e. the numbers below do not represent one response per participant. Therefore, not all responses will equal 100%.

Q8: What helped your learning during the course?	Applicability and hands on activities (50%), Casual socializing (33%), The emerging Community of Practice (22%), Group discussions (11%) and Reflective activities (11%) were helpful to students during the course.
Q9: What hindered your learning during the course?	Time constraints and crammed content (44%), Lectures (22%) and Conflict (22%) hindered student learning during the course.
Q10: Describe the situation(s) when you were most engaged in the course.	Outside the classroom (33%), Group work (39%), Discussions (28%), Scenarios (22%) and Bill Rees (11%) were when and where students were most engaged in the course.
Q11: Describe the situation(s) when you were least engaged in this course	Didactic sessions (47%) and Afternoons (24%) were when students were least engaged.
Q12: How has this course changed your thinking?	This question generated widely diverse answers, not all of which were categorized. Some of the pillars and course objectives were echoed in the responses such as, gaining a working definition of Ecohealth (31%) and working on being reflective researchers (13%).
Q13: How you would change and/or improve this course?	Students advise that the course should be Less: less crammed (28%), less didactic lessons (15%) More: informal opportunities for interaction (28%), group discussions and focus on application or practice (15%)
Q14: Please comment on the locations, facilities, accommodation a learning environment during the course. Were any particularly conducive to the learning process?	Students gave overall positive reviews (41%) of the locations, facilities, accommodations, and learning environment during the course while some gave negative reviews of classrooms (29%).

Section 1C: Reflective Questions (Q15-17) (students only)

Q15: Consider and describe your level of engagement with respect to your “head, hands and heart.”	Six students responded that they were very engaged with their head, hands and heart while 1 student was not very engaged generally. Five students felt their head was engaged while three did not. Five students felt that their heart was engaged, especially through the connections they made with other participants. Two students found their hands were engaged while three did not. One student found mixed levels of engagement with all and two students did not comment on their head, hands or heart, focusing instead on community engagement.
Q16: Describe, using specific examples, how you would apply your new knowledge, skills and attitudes/values to a situation or project of your choice (your thesis, your community etc).	Six students responded with specific ecohealth examples, largely related to their own research or practice. Several others mentioned specific aspects of the course as influential, such as, social networking theory, systematic reviews, questioning the relevance of particular research to participants, Analee and Jerry's research project organization chart, qualitative research methodologies and the three pillars for risk assessment. Two students are still confused with how to apply their ecohealth training
Q17: What questions remain for you? How might you address those questions?	Six students avoided the question; four did not respond and two wrote that they did not have questions. Ten student responses revolved around applying ecohealth concepts, training or an ecohealth approach in their own research. Three student responses asked sophisticated questions and demonstrated important critical reflections on ecohealth and its socio-political implications.