

# Students as Engaged Partners in Directed Research Courses

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Volume 10, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111459ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v10i1.70862>

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Publisher(s)

University of Saskatchewan

ISSN

2369-1190 (print)

2368-416X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Benenson, J. & Johnson, S. (2024). Students as Engaged Partners in Directed Research Courses. *Engaged Scholar Journal*, 10(1), 25–33.  
<https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v10i1.70862>

## Article abstract

This report from the field reflects on the authors' experiences in a directed research course on the topic of youth civic engagement in Canada. A literature review was co-written as part of a directed research course where the instructor was a visiting professor from the United States and the student was an undergraduate student in Canada. The content of this report was gathered during various stages of the directed research course and is informed by literature focused on students as engaged partners in teaching and learning in higher education. Specifically, we reflect on the ways viewing students as engaged partners can leverage their knowledge and lived experiences when engaging in directed research courses, especially when the student and faculty member may be coming from different countries in North America. In addition, we reflect on how designing a directed research course that views students as engaged partners can provide a rich ground for the redistribution of power in higher education and strengthen the quality of research through the co-creation of new knowledge and ideas.

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## Students as Engaged Partners in Directed Research Courses

**Jodi Benenson, Skylar Johnson**

**ABSTRACT** This report from the field reflects on the authors' experiences in a directed research course on the topic of youth civic engagement in Canada. A literature review was co-written as part of a directed research course where the instructor was a visiting professor from the United States and the student was an undergraduate student in Canada. The content of this report was gathered during various stages of the directed research course and is informed by literature focused on students as engaged partners in teaching and learning in higher education. Specifically, we reflect on the ways viewing students as engaged partners can leverage their knowledge and lived experiences when engaging in directed research courses, especially when the student and faculty member may be coming from different countries in North America. In addition, we reflect on how designing a directed research course that views students as engaged partners can provide a rich ground for the redistribution of power in higher education and strengthen the quality of research through the co-creation of new knowledge and ideas.

**KEYWORDS** collaborative research, students as engaged partners, civic engagement, directed research courses

Undergraduate research experiences such as research internships, research assistantships, research-based courses, in-class research, and directed studies courses are often considered a high-impact practice in higher education. This is because they provide opportunities for students to participate in active scholarly engagement through knowledge acquisition, empirical observation, disciplinary skill advancement, excitement in answering research questions, professional advancement and development, and personal development (Kuh, 2008; Lopatto, 2010). Directed research courses, in particular, offer one avenue for students to work with faculty members or community partners on a range of research projects, including developing a research proposal, identifying specific research questions, exploring relevant literature, or collecting and analyzing data (Reitmaier Koehler et al., 2015). While the format of directed research courses varies across academic disciplines and contexts—and may also be called independent/individual studies courses, directed readings courses, final year projects, or honors theses—they are primarily conducted for course credit and do not involve paid or volunteer research experiences like internships and assistantships (Moore et al., 2018).

While much of the literature in higher education documents the motivations, positive outcomes, challenges, and barriers associated with directed research courses (see Moore et

al., 2018; Hvengaard et al., 2013), this research rarely offers moments for reflection during the directed research course itself. In this report from the field, we offer a reflection on our experiences in a directed research course as a faculty member and undergraduate student. The content of this report was gathered during various stages of a directed research course focused on youth civic engagement, and we ground our reflection in literature focused on students as engaged partners in teaching and learning in higher education (Healey et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2016). Specifically, we reflect on how viewing students as engaged partners in directed research courses leverages their knowledge and lived experiences, especially when the student and faculty member may be coming from different countries in North America. In addition, we reflect on how designing a directed research course that views students as engaged partners can provide a rich ground for the redistribution of power in higher education, and ultimately strengthen the quality of the research through the co-creation of new knowledge and ideas.

### **Reflection Context: A Directed Research Course in Canada**

Like many directed studies courses in North America (Hvengaard et al., 2013), this directed research course was a semester-long course involving one-on-one instruction with a faculty mentor and a focus on student-led independent research. The directed reading course, entitled Directed Research in Social Sciences, took place at the University of Ottawa. The main objective of the directed research course was to provide top-performing fourth-year students with hands-on research experience in areas that connect to the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa. Additional objectives include increasing students' depth and breadth of knowledge, knowledge of methodologies, application of knowledge, communication skills, awareness of the limits of knowledge, and autonomy and employability (Centre on Governance, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2023). At the end of the term, students receive three course credits for their work. The research supervisors and the director are responsible for assigning an alphanumeric grade at the end of the term.

The instructor was a visiting Fulbright scholar and professor from the United States, and the student was in her fourth year at the University of Ottawa and from Canada. According to the course description, "This course allows for the application of already acquired abilities and the acquisition of new knowledge related to carrying out research" (Centre on Governance, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2023). Because the course invites students to participate in an ongoing research project, the objectives are to "enrich the quality of their student experience, increase students' autonomy and professional capacity in their area of studies, improve students' knowledge of methodologies and the research process, and understand the limits of knowledge in research within the social sciences and to become familiar with scientific communication" (Centre on Governance, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2023).

### **An Engaged Research Partnership: Documenting Our Journey**

Student engagement through partnership allows for very high levels of active student participation and views partnership as a way of doing things, rather than just an input or an outcome (Healey et al., 2016). Healey et al. (2014) provide four areas in which students can

be partners in teaching and learning: learning, teaching, and assessment; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; subject-based research and inquiry; and scholarship of teaching and learning.

Below, we document our collective journey navigating this directed research course: we ground our reflection by viewing the student's engagement through a partnership lens and drawing on related literature. Specifically, we reflect on the ways we led with our strengths and embraced 'learning by doing' in our research partnership. This reflection reveals how an engaged partnership approach strengthened our contribution to the field of youth civic engagement in Canada during the research process and also invited us to think differently about what a student-faculty research partnership could look like. We independently wrote reflections throughout the semester and have included excerpts from our reflections below.<sup>1</sup>

### **Central to a Partnership: Leading with Strengths**

The Higher Education Academy's (2016) framework for *Student Engagement Through Partnership* suggests nine values that underlie successful student engagement: authenticity, inclusivity, honesty, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality, and responsibility. These values guided our engaged research partnership. It was important to both of us that we understood each other's strengths, backgrounds, and interests, as they helped shape both the content and structure of the directed reading course:

*JB:* The first week of class, Skylar and I spent time getting to know each other to learn about each other's backgrounds, research interests, and goals for the course. I shared information about my professional background and expertise and invited Skylar to share hers. It was during this initial meeting that I learned about Skylar's majors, involvement in student groups at the university, activities outside of the university, familiarity with qualitative data analysis, and her work at the Senate of Canada.

*SJ:* The first time I met Professor Benenson, she began by asking me what my interests were and what skills I hoped to work on through the research project. Her commitment to taking an approach based on her students' strengths and desired areas of growth created a very empowering experience. Throughout the project, Professor Benenson encouraged me to share and reflect on my experiences and to strategically use my prior knowledge. In addition to being an encouraging listener, she helped me to understand the benefits of this process by sharing examples from her community engagement and past research. Combined with the flexible structure of the course, this allowed my goals and knowledge to be incorporated into the evolution of the project.

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<sup>1</sup> JB are the initials of the faculty member, and SJ are the initials of the student.

The focus of the project over the course of the semester was a literature review on youth civic engagement in Canada. While the instructor had expertise in youth civic engagement literature in the United States, she was a visiting scholar in Canada and relied on the student for support as a thought partner in this endeavor. Acknowledging the student as an expert with lived experience engaging in Canadian civic and political life as a young person influenced the direction and strengthened the quality of the literature review.

*JB:* Each week, Skylar contributed examples from her own lived experiences that shaped the direction and focus of different aspects of the literature review. For example, she provided recommendations of youth-oriented community organizations that were leaders in Canada, federal national service programs that either she or her peers had engaged in as young people, and challenges that she and her peers have faced when trying to access civic opportunities. For example, Skylar shared a challenge she and others have faced accessing volunteer opportunities in the community as college students, especially those involving a long-term commitment. We also discussed federal national service opportunities such as AmeriCorps (in the United States) and Service Corps (Canada) and the differences between national service in our respective countries. These conversations led us down different literature paths, but also paths that led me to connect with people at many of these organizations and institutions.

*SJ:* During one discussion on the different obstacles young voters encounter, we were able to establish based on each other's knowledge a rough sketch of the different voter registration processes and where they were used. Likewise, although exploring the literature allowed us to explore the terminology used in the United States as compared to Canada (such as the different usage of "civic infrastructure" and "civic health"), several distinctions and potential causes were detected faster through conversations at our check-in meetings. This also allowed for a richness in dialogue which allowed for an ongoing comparison of anecdotal experience that led to a number of insights.

According to Moore et al. (2018), directed research courses differ significantly from other courses because they "involve frequent and more personalized contact between students and instructors as well as a much stronger emphasis on mentorship practices" (p. 772). To ensure mutual understanding and reciprocity, as well as to build trust and foster an engaged partnership, we met each week in person to discuss the tasks at hand. Additionally, because the student began her first semester in university during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in fall 2020, she expressed that in-person meetings were important for her educational experience at the university:

*SJ:* In our case, Professor Benenson provided some tentative tasks and dates to shape the work, as well as suggested a weekly check-in meeting, which became a cornerstone of collaboration and dialogue throughout the project. Though these meetings were not a standard or required part of the directed research course, they were an immensely valuable part of this project and experience for a number of reasons. For research of a comparative nature between countries, as in the case of this project, lived experience in each environment helped speed up the process of identifying differences between the contexts.

*JB:* We were able to use some of our initial meetings to brainstorm ideas, make sense of findings, or redirect aspects of the project, as needed. For example, after the first few weeks, we both recognized that the topic of youth civic engagement in Canada was very broad, and we decided to focus on three specific areas for the literature review that we felt were the most relevant and offered opportunities for comparative research between the United States and Canada. While we might have reached the same conclusions on our own, coming together each week to talk through our ideas and thought processes helped ensure that we were on the same page and that the larger aims of the literature review were not lost.

### **Challenges and Opportunities: Learning by Doing**

Healy et al. (2016) contend that “only where students are given a significant amount of autonomy, independence, and choice can this be considered a partnership” (p. 10). Both the student and instructor learned a great deal by being open, flexible, and responsive to the directed research course structure:

*SJ:* As I learned, the way a research project works in the “real world” has significant differences from the structure of the classroom. The flexibility of the course structure posed both a challenge and a unique opportunity. As an undergraduate student, the routine of regular class times, set topics, assigned weekly readings, and scheduled evaluations provides a fixed framework in which learning and academic work are conducted. While this course had a proposed outline of the research to be conducted, as written by the research partner (in this case, Professor Benenson), the scope and approach to the research topic evolved throughout the course of the project, as guided by the professor and student.

The student also learned about the limitations of what can be accomplished during a semester-long directed research course, as opposed to a longer course.

*SJ:* The combination of the course only lasting one semester and starting in late September rather than at the beginning with other classes led to a compressed

timeframe in which to complete an entire research project, especially due to the long wait times for responses from other organizations. Though this time frame may prove tight to complete an in-depth study, it was certainly sufficient for building and refining an idea and creating a relationship between the professor and the student, both of which may be leveraged in future work.

Indeed, the strengthening of the partnership between the professor and student over the course of the semester—a partnership undergirded by trust, openness, flexibility, and responsiveness—led to many learning opportunities. For example, it exposed the student to different research resources:

*SJ:* There were also a lot of resources which I was aware of but never really considered for my use which Professor Benenson invited me to explore and helped me navigate. These included university librarians, centres, and conferences—the professor made these services accessible at the undergraduate level, whereas they are often only used by faculty members or graduate students.

The course structure and engagement in subject-based research on youth civic engagement also invited opportunities for learning through inquiry in the community (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). Specifically, both the student and instructor immersed themselves within civic and research spaces in Canada while conducting research for this project:

*JB:* When discussing a course that Skylar was taking on digital journalism, we began discussing the availability of national datasets in Canada focused on youth civic engagement in nonprofit organizations and charities in Canada. This led me to contact and meet with an economist at Statistics Canada, who shared more about this specific data landscape in the country. Skylar and I also attended a nonprofit data summit at Carleton University, which led us toward a new area of the literature around youth civic engagement in Canada.

And at the end of the semester, learning by doing shaped both the instructor's and student's perceptions of what is possible in youth civic engagement. The content of the course and the partnership model of student engagement in research also helped both the student and instructor consider future career and research pathways:

*SJ:* Personally, this course has helped me to think critically about the purpose, accessibility, and value of civic engagement for youth. It has also helped me to shift my own mindset about what counts as “civic engagement”—where I had previously only considered formal civic engagement, I began to recognize the informal ways my peers and myself engage in our communities. Taking this course as a fourth-year student making decisions about what to do next

year was also very beneficial, as it helped me get a rich preview and better understanding of what pursuing a Master's degree might be like. My interest in the non-profit field (both as a field of work and research) was renewed through witnessing the innovation and partnerships occurring, and hearing Professor Benenson discuss some of her other work and projects helped me understand the variety of opportunities in the sector.

*JB:* Through this course, I was able to learn about some of the cultural differences between the United States and Canada through Skylar's experiences, specifically around issues affecting young people. For example, we discussed the uniqueness of civic networks that exist in Francophone civic engagement spaces. We acknowledged that because we were only reviewing Canadian youth civic engagement literature in the English language, we were missing a significant portion of the research on this topic. This is one example of how this partnership has reinforced my own cultural responsiveness and shaped the direction and focus of the next phase of the literature review.

### **Conclusion: Final Thoughts**

As a result of this engaged student research partnership, our literature review on youth civic engagement will make a stronger and more representative contribution to the field. While the course structure was imperfect, leading with strengths and embracing 'learning by doing' ensured that the directed research environment was ripe for inquiry, engagement, learning, and growth:

*JB:* Both a personal and professional highlight from this directed research course was the opportunity to research youth civic engagement with a young person. It is very rare to have a chance to study a topic about a new (to me) country, while a visitor in the new country, with a person from the country.

*SJ:* As a result of participating in this course, I feel more prepared to engage not only in research, but in my community. I am thankful to Professor Benenson for facilitating such an encouraging environment—this course and partnership provided a truly impactful learning opportunity that enriched my undergraduate student experience.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank Dr. Eric Champagne and Dr. Anna Bogic from the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa for facilitating and supporting the directed research course discussed in this article.



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