Course Evaluation, Critical and Creative Thinking, UMass Boston
CRCRTH 653 Epidemiological Thinking and Population Health
Peter Taylor
Hybrid, 2017 Spring

Note: lettered responses represent the same individual across the questions, so that all "a)" responses come from the same person, and so on.

1. Start with an evaluation of yourself. What were your personal goals in taking this course? Did you achieve them? How would you have proceeded differently if you were doing this course again? What have been your major personal obstacles to learning more from this course?

a) I didn't have much of an idea what epidemiology was before I started this course. My goals were to gain an understanding of epidemiology and better understand how I can apply it to my own areas of interest. I think the emphasis on application was helpful towards achieving these goals. I had a hard time with some of the highly technical readings that were included in this course.

b) My primary goal was to be better able assess how successful policies are at dealing with health issues in a meaningful way. I feel like I now have a better appreciation for the complexities of the exposure to disease relationship. My difficulties largely were largely due to a disconnect between my primary studies and epidemiology itself. I took the class mainly out of personal interest. At first, I didn't think about ways in which epidemiology could be used to look at where social behaviours were the outcome but now I can think of factors such as SES and culture as being exposures contributing to the behaviors I am looking at.

c) My goal was simple--to learn about the field of epidemiological research and its application in public health programs. I certainly did achieve this. Because of my unfamiliarity with the course content in the beginning, this goal does not address what I now feel to be one of the main learning outcomes--using the thinking required for critical analysis of epidemiological research and related public health policies to better understand and analyze the practice of science in general and its social contexts. I achieved this new goal as well. The only major personal obstacle lo learning more was, for me, simply time constraints caused by constantly moving around during the semester and preparing for a major shift of residence.

d) My goals were to understand why I was in this class as a graduate nursing student and to learn how to critically read and evaluate scholarly writings. I achieved both of those goals. I am a night nurse and being tired and working each night before and after class was hard. If I could have chosen a different work schedule around this class, I think that would have been more beneficial.

e) I was interested in learning more about Epi and deciding if I wanted to pursue a course of medical study based on my interest in the course material/topics. That being said, I had zero background knowledge of Epi and took statistics over 10 years ago in undergraduate studies. If I took this course again, I don't think that I would change anything.

1. Self-evaluation (continued). What have you learned about what you have to do to make a course stimulating and productive (with respect to the format of this course: face-to-face, online, hybrid)?

a) I think the hybrid learning environment of this course made it more interesting, particularly because people from so many different backgrounds came together to share their own experiences.

b) I have always found face-to-face to be the most agreeable form of learning for me.

c) It was important for me to come to class well-prepared since the remove of being online as well as the occasional technical issues created distractions of their own. I also greatly enjoyed the material and the analytical perspective, so I did not mind the extensive reading and online research. I found both of those to be useful and rewarding with increased time spent.

d) Being ready to participate by fully reading the articles and even staring to read the other's responses was a great way to get ready for class. I would usually re read my blog submissions in the 15 mins before class to refresh my memory.
e) For those participants online, there need to be breakout sessions for those people to feel that they can talk with peers. Limited participation feels distant and disengaging.

2. General Evaluation of course. What was special about this course (+positive and/or -negative)? How did the course meet or not meet your expectations? In what ways do you think this course could be improved?

a) This course doesn't just introduce you to a new topic, it introduces a new way of thinking and understanding science and health. That part was really exciting to me and it has changed the way I consume research. The course met my expectations, although the style of the course was completely different from anything I could have expected.
b) The course to me was a bit of a methods hybrid to me of epidemiological methodology were introduced while the focus was on understanding the concepts and not necessarily the how. For me it was reasonable to learn concepts without all the formulas for things such as predictive value or mortality rates. Since I am not an epidemiologist and don't work really with epidemiological studies I can use the concepts in my own research by tweaking them.
c) As I mentioned before, I especially appreciated the broad applicability of the concepts. This made it far more useful to me than if it had been more narrowly focused on teaching just the field itself. It is difficult to think of improvements. I thought that the weekly themes were useful, and I liked the three-part assignment schedule (weekly annotations, glossary item, and application of theme to personal project). I thought these were the right mix allowing me to absorb basic concepts of the field while practicing critical analysis of it. So, no suggestions. Sorry!
d) Having to virtually attend the class each Tuesday, was a huge help. I think if I had tried to do this asynchronously I would have been very confused. I liked the feedback on each blog post that pushed me to think further and look deeper into what I was reading.
e) This course was special because it was not heavily focused on grades, which was both positive and negative. I liked being able to 'fail' the first time around and not have the incorrect commentary held against me. I think this teaching style allowed for greater learning. However, at times, I found the lack of grades frustrating and anxiety provoking.

2. General evaluation (continued). In what ways did your attitude to doing the course change through the semester? How does it compare with other graduate courses? What would be your overall recommendation to prospective students?

a) I think overall, the expectations for this course were easier than most of my other courses. The work load was smaller, but it allowed me to give each assignment and reading the attention it deserved. I was able to shift my thinking in ways I didn't expect. I would recommend this course to prospective students, but I think some people will not like the structure of the course.
b) The course in terms of structure was not like anything I have taken in my doctoral studies. Many of my classes focus on methods rather than pattern of thinking.
c) As I said, earlier, I came to appreciate that the focus was broader than epidemiology. I became more comfortable considering the applications to an analysis of science in general (issues of establishing causation, determining validity, matching the methods to the question, etc.)
d) As the course progressed and I started to understand the expectations, it became more manageable. This was one of my first graduate courses, so I am unable to compare. I would recommend the class. It was a lot of reading but once I figured out my own personal homework schedule, it was very manageable.
e) I learned to keep an attitude of perseverance for the long haul in mind throughout the course. The workload is substantial in terms of the readings, but if I put in the required time, I knew that I could

succeed. I would highly recommend creating a routine for completing assignments, otherwise you will feel lost when the workload increases post spring break.

3. Evaluation in relation to the course description. Read the course description/goals below. Comment on how well the goals expressed in the syllabus were met. Make general and specific suggestions about how these could be better met.

Introduction to the concepts, methods, and problems involved in analyzing the biological and social influences on behaviors and diseases and in translating such analyses into population health policy and practice. Special attention given to social inequalities, changes over the life course, and heterogeneous pathways. Case studies and course projects are shaped to accommodate students with interests in diverse fields related to health and public policy. Students are assumed to have a statistical background, but the course emphasizes epidemiological literacy with a view to collaborating thoughtfully with specialists, not technical expertise.

a) While I think the class overall what spot-on to these goals, I think for someone like myself who really didn't have any background in epidemiology, I would have liked to have spent a little more time orienting myself to what epidemiology is at the beginning of the class. Particularly in the first few weeks, I had a lot of unanswered questions each week and I had a hard time grasping all of the material.

b) I do feel the course is geared towards epidemiological literacy more than technical expertise but I feel I have covered this in my above comments.

c) I think that the course met these goals well. As I said earlier, I think that all of the three weekly assignments together were useful. However, it is interesting to me that the description doesn't mention the wider applicability of the analytical methods we used to understand epidemiology.It seems that, while we were focused on epidemiology, nearly all, if not all, of the issues we studied are applicable to science in general. So this really became, for me, a concentrated effort in understanding issues of scientific methods, interpretation, and application.

d) I think each statement of the syllabus description was covered. I was really unaware of how social inequities and environmental influences effect a persons health. I now have a changed view on how a persons life course can effect their future or current health. Statistical verbiage was something that I needed to brush up on and reading the Epidemiology book and keeping up with the chapters was very helpful.

e) I think the course did well to meet these goals, but that student effort could confound the global outcomes and expectations for meeting the work according to graduate and doctoral standards.

4. Synthetic statement (1 or 2 paragraphs). Building on your comments from Qs 1-3, compose a synthetic statement (1 or 2 paragraphs) evaluating this course. (Imagine readers who might not be willing to wade through all the answers to Qs 1-3, but are willing to read more than simply the numerical averages of standard course evaluations.) Please make comments that help the instructor develop the course in the future and that enable some third party appreciate the course's strengths and weaknesses. Among other things you might comment on the overall content and progression of classes, the session activities, and the use of mentors to support the learning in the course.

a) I had no background or real understanding of epidemiology coming into this course. While I enjoyed the topic and was able to connect to my own areas of interest, the main thing I really gained from this course was a new way of thinking about health and science. I think I'm a more inquisitive and educated consumer of research from taking this course. There were times when the reading became very technical, and I still don't understand everything I read. There were also times when I felt concepts could've been introduced a bit more simply and then built up for better comprehension. For example, the week we talked about modeling, the first model we looked at was a very complex model that was really overwhelming. Maybe starting simple and building into complex models would have helped me personally. This is also true of the first class. I would've benefited from more attention to basic ground

principles of epidemiology since I had no background in the topic, but we jumped into some fairly deep research very quickly.

b) This course is not a standard epidemiology course that focuses on the mathematics used by epidemiologists but rather looks into the thinking used by epidemiologists. For students whose study of focus is not epidemiology this concentration on epidemiologic literacy may translate into concepts of epidemiologic methodology being transferred over to their studies. For those wanting to be able to conduct epidemiologic studies after having taken the class the lack of the technical aspects may be somewhat frustrating and a class in the health sciences more appropriate. A student wanting to learn biostatics would not get what they want from this course. Where this course has merit is in teaching complexities of causation and how to come to it.

c) This course provides a deep dive into epidemiology--methods, interpretation, and application in the sphere of public health. There is a large amount of reading, and some of the concepts (statistical analysis, epidemiological theory) can be technically involved. But the course is nicely organized into weekly themes and assignments that each focus on a specific area. The most important part of this course is the applicability to science in general. The analyses and critiques of epidemiology used are easily applicable to any scientific field.

d) This class really opened my eyes to the complexities of the health of the population. It also showed me ways in which social inequities effect the health of a society. I was not sure how it would apply to my future career, but I think learning how to critically read scholarly articles will be a huge help throughout graduate school. It is expected that you read many articles each week and it is important to keep up with them as they truly apply to each weeks theme and helps to clarify the idea of it. Professor Taylor is also very responsive to any emails or needs for office hour conference calls. He very much will help with any assignment you have questions with. Use the other students in class as well. He gave out the UMB email addresses and it was nice to be able to communicate with each other as I was an online student.

e) There are high expectations for anyone who is interested in participating in this course. The predictable notion that the more work you put in, the more you will get out, applies in rare form to this course. The readings are difficult and very time consuming, so 7 hours of work a week is a fair expectation for the conscientious student. If you need additional help, the professor is very willing, although his explanations may not always ring clear.   Participate in class, whether online or in person, in order to gain the most understanding of the texts and concepts through conversation. Try not to feel discouraged by the frequent revise and resubmit emails, they are only there to push your understanding further. It is a course that is well worth the effort if you are truly invested in learning about epidemiology, but it is not worth while for the faint of heart or mildly interested.

I give permission for my response to Question 4 to be included anonymously in the compilation posted to the CCT wiki (and thus viewable to the public).

a) Yes
b) Yes
c) Yes
d) Yes
e) Yes

Using the scale below, overall, how would you evaluate this course?
1. Very Poor   2. Poor   3. Average   4. Good   5. Excellent

a) 4
b) 4
c) 5
d) 4
e) 4

Using the scale below, overall, how would you evaluate this instructor?
1. Very Poor   2. Poor   3. Average   4. Good   5. Excellent

a) 4
b) 4
c) 5
d) 5
e) 3