

# Co-Created and Student-Led Teaching Materials: The FOODWAYS Research Project

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## Abstract

Undergraduate students' research experience is important as it allows them to gain the necessary skills required for future opportunities. Affording students various opportunities to work with faculty on research during their undergraduate degree provides a rich learning opportunity. This paper advocates for student and faculty partnerships at the undergraduate level, where students and faculty work collaboratively. ITA235, Cucina Italiana: Italian History and Culture Through Food (University of Toronto Mississauga) acts as a model for student-led research, which includes a large component of student and faculty collaboration. The FOODWAYS project is a teaching resource currently being developed, and is housed within the course as an Experiential Learning (EL) opportunity. Through participating in the FOODWAYS research project, students have exposure to various digital humanities research methods and work in partnership with faculty and graduate student researchers to broaden their research skill set.

**Keywords:** digital humanities, student-led, capstone research, co-created research, undergraduate research, undergraduate teaching resource

**G**ravett, Yakovchuk, and Kinchin (2020) highlight that, in recent years, there has been an increase in interest from the international higher education community in exploring how students can be part of a partnership with faculty in carrying out research and working towards the development and enhancement of both learning and teaching. Undergraduate research activities undertaken collaboratively between faculty and students, with opportunities for students to take on

leadership roles by being assigned project management tasks, provide spaces for students to develop desirable soft skills. Through discussion of a digital humanities initiative embedded within a capstone Italian Studies course on offer at the University of Toronto Mississauga, the learning impacts of including a co-created and student-led research archive, as historical and cultural teaching materials, are discussed. Ultimately, the involvement of undergraduate students in the creation of teaching materials, as highlighted by the FOODWAYS project, creates a critical opportunity for students to participate in research at the undergraduate level.

### ***ITA235 Cucina Italiana: Italian History and Culture Through Food***

ITA235, *Cucina Italiana: Italian History and Culture Through Food*, looks at the regional diversity of Italian food and looks at the factors that have shaped Italian culinary traditions. Students are provided with the opportunity to explore their own culinary traditions throughout the course (University of Toronto Mississauga, Academic Calendar, 2023). In recognition of the diverse student population of ITA235, and in line with providing students the opportunity to explore their own culinary traditions, the newly adapted FOODWAYS project, allows students to be involved with humanities research in a meaningful and authentic way. Students connect with community members and learn about a cultural foodway in Canada with which they resonate. This opportunity enhances the cultural connection students have with the coursework they produce. The contribution to the FOODWAYS teaching material encourages students to participate in the inquiry model and let their curiosities guide their research, with the idea that the mindset that “inquiry-based learning is better learning...and we all want that for our students” (Wilson, 2003) is at the fore. The research initiative doubles as Community-Engaged Learning (CEL), where students interact virtually or in-person with a community to track movements in demographics and sociocultural and sociolinguistic changes to local diaspora over time.

The integration of a co-created, student-led research project into the course (ITA235), ultimately increases student opportunity to participate in humanities research early on in their studies. It has been found that “students who participate in collaborative undergraduate research with faculty early on reported gains in their ability to think analytically and logically, put ideas together, [and] learn on their own” (Ishiyama, 2002).

Additionally, in removing barriers to Experiential Learning (EL) opportunities by integrating the FOODWAYS project as an optional opportunity, substituting regular coursework, the attempt is made to mitigate the additional burden that EL can place on students. This attempt is in line with part of the University of Toronto Mississauga's (UTM) academic plan, which is to "provide experiential education opportunities to all UTM undergraduates" (University of Toronto Mississauga, 2017). Students can participate in the research opportunity, contribute to creating open-access data while sharing lecture time with the professor, and present their findings to their classmates via a presentation style final assignment.

Through the integration of an open-accessed, community-based research project within a capstone course at UTM, Professor Teresa Lobalsamo (Associate Professor, Teaching Stream [Italian Studies], University of Toronto Mississauga), has effectively curated The FOODWAYS project as a pathway for undergraduate students to engage in humanities research, all the while contributing to a rich open-access teaching resource on cultural and historical preservations of foodways across the country of Canada.

### **The FOODWAYS Project: Teaching Resource**

The FOODWAYS project began as a virtual Scholars-in-Residence (SiR) project at the Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto, in which undergraduate students are granted the opportunity to participate in a month-long research intensive during the summer and work closely alongside faculty on their projects (Faculty of Arts and Science University of Toronto, 2023). Through the SiR program and the ITA235 Special Research Program, undergraduate students, across multiple disciplines, came together in 2020 to begin creating the '[Mapping-Italian Canadian Foodways](#)' project, with a focus on the city of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Digital humanities technologies, namely, Omeka and ArcGIS, were leveraged to create the public-facing, open-access digital archive ([www.italiancanadianfoodways.ca](http://www.italiancanadianfoodways.ca)). Once the research was mobilized and the first iteration of the public-facing site was complete, Professor Lobalsamo and I began integrating the research project into the ITA235 course permanently and enhanced its presence within the community. With the support of the Experiential Education Unit (EEU) at UTM, this integration was made possible due to financial and

staff support that was allocated to support the launch of such an initiative in the course, and this financial support continues to be a large factor in the project's ongoing integration. The project effectively brings the Canadian food community together and serves as a teaching resource, which uncovers historical and culturally relevant data about the various cultural food scenes in the country of Canada. In recognition of the diverse student population in ITA235, the project has since been transformed from the 'Mapping Italian-Canadian Foodways' project, into the FOODWAYS project, where students can contribute to the project and create exhibitions for a diverse range of cultural Foodways throughout Canada.

As a teaching resource, The FOODWAYS project embraces community-based research (CBR) at its core. Bischoff and Jany (2018) define CBR as (1) community situated, where research begins with a topic that is relevant to the community, (2) collaborative, where community members and researchers share control of the research agenda through active involvement in the research and dissemination, and (3) action-oriented, meaning that the process and results are useful to community members. In applying these three frameworks for The FOODWAYS project teaching resource, the historical preservation project was sparked and mobilized due to the pandemic and the numerous Italian eateries that were closing around the city without their history being preserved. Thus, it was a call to action for Lobalsamo to begin preserving food history. Further, to the point of the project being collaborative, students continuously collaborate with community members to curate their archives and preserve their history, and community members are active participants throughout. Lastly, the tool is action-oriented in that it preserves the history of eateries on their behalf, providing them with a digitized and sustainable way to preserve their stories. In using this CBR teaching tool within courses, such as ITA235, and within the field at large (i.e., Food Studies and Historical Studies), oral histories are shared with genuine intentions.

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