



Canadian Mennonite University is offering a new course called The Social Innovation Lab involving a business incubator for start-up companies and non-profit organizations.

CMU photos

CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY

REAL-LIFE PROBLEM SOLVING

By Geoff Kirbyson for the Free Press

Janelle Neufeld didn't want to wait until after graduation to get her hands dirty working with real companies, and thanks to a new business incubator at Canadian Mennonite University, she won't have to.

The third-year student at CMU signed up for a new course called The Social Innovation Lab, which brings together young companies looking to solve particular business challenges and students eager to put the theory they have learned in class into a real-life situation. The course involves a business incubator where start-up companies and non-profit organizations are given both the training, space and brain power to help them get off the ground or move to the next level.

"It strongly ties into what CMU stands for — not taking learning at face value but finding ways to make it multi-disciplinary and use it for the betterment of the community," she said.

Neufeld has been matched up, along with a few other students, with a pair of enterprises thus far — Green Tech Environmental, a manufacturer of high-quality health, environmental and energy electronic products, and Blossom, a health-care company — both of which have taken up residency in CMU's 6,000-square-foot incubator, The Centre for Resilience.

"With Green Tech, we're looking at innovative ways to reach their audience, increase their brand awareness and have brand ambassadors endorsing their products. With Blossom, we're working on rebranding it to help it become more well known in the community and more competitive.

We're working with the founder to create a mission statement and developing a website to find different ways to reach their audience," he said.

CMU's Redekop School of Business launched a new social entrepreneurship major in September, which is integrated with the business incubator. The new major is part of CMU's four-year Bachelor of Business Administration program.

James Magnus-Johnston, director of the Centre for Resilience and an instructor of social entrepreneurship at CMU, said social entrepreneurship combines business theory, social sciences and social and ecological metrics in business planning. Social entrepreneurs work in business or the non-profit sector and try to solve social or ecological problems.

He has offered a number of courses over the last two years that have blended business and social sciences and it was time to formalize some of this work and create an educational stream for students.

"The business or non-profit will pitch a problem to this class of students and say they'd like somebody to work on it to help them move their operations forward. The students respond with an idea and they'll go back and forth three or four times and we'll carve up a plan," he said.

Some of the companies and non-profits to have moved in include digital marketing firms, professional practices in legal and health care, psychology consultants, technical entrepreneurs and providers of commercial and residential compost collection services.

The students will have time to succeed but they will also have time to fail, an all-important lesson to learn in business, Magnus-Johnston said.

"They attempt an idea and follow it through to a road block. Then they either see it through or they drop it. If they drop it, they have to try a different prototype. We're encouraging the students to try something and hopefully succeed but pivot when necessary. Too often in formal education, students are encouraged to check off a long list of things they know will please the professor and they'll abide by whatever the constraints require. This is a completely different way of trying to get through the program," he said. ■

