

## UTSC Teaching Award recipient and urbanist Ahmed Allahwala encourages students to bring their experiences of city living into the classroom - and to engage in the community



As a student at the Free University of Berlin, UTSC professor Ahmed Allahwala initially aspired to be a journalist. Then he stumbled upon an urban theory course that would change his life. Allahwala – associate professor, teaching stream, and associate chair, City Studies in the Department of Human Geography – helped develop the City Studies program at UTSC. Allahwala is a recipient of a 2020 UTSC Teaching Award, in the Associate and Full Professor category. Below, he talks about his passion for community-engaged learning and all things urban.

### **What is your teaching approach in the classroom?**

I try to bring the city into academic engagement in the classroom. One of the pillars of my teaching philosophy is: I really draw on *difference* as a key characteristic of the urban. I call this the pedagogy in and of the city.

I also draw on the diversity in the classroom, which is highly reflective of our city. That's one of the beauties of teaching in an environment like Toronto. I encourage students to draw on their personal experience living in the city to contribute to class discussion and enrich their coursework.

**Can you give an example of how you encourage students to draw on their experiences?**

Almost all of the students who show up on Monday morning to my urban planning lecture have commuted – often for an hour or two – to campus. They will all have an experience of it being rather challenging, even on a regular day. So we might talk about “transit captives,” meaning folks in the city who rely on public transit because they cannot afford private automobiles. This is a simple example of where we can bring in personal, everyday experiences of being a city resident to develop theory around urban infrastructure, urban politics and urban resources. That’s where the experiential comes in; how experiences are a source of knowledge production and theory development.

**You have engaged in experiential learning in your Cities Studies courses for a long time. Why is it so central to your teaching?**

I am a believer of experiential education and, more specifically, community-engaged learning. This ties back to my teaching philosophy of pedagogy in and of the city.

It can be very productive to bring the lived experience into the classroom, but you can push beyond the space of the classroom to think of higher education in relation to the communities that surround the campus. I would argue that extending the university beyond the campus makes the physical, cultural and epistemic boundaries between the academy and the community more permeable.

Practically, this translates into finding and creating spaces where we can value learning and teaching from, and with, partners who are normally outside of the university. To learn from, and with, people whose insights may not be considered scholarly. That’s really where I think the magic of critical and community-engaged learning lies.

**What was one of your favourite experiential learning opportunities?**

The one closest to my heart is my third-year course called “Urban Communities and Neighbourhood Case Study: East Scarborough.” I work with students in collaboration with a community partner on a community-based participatory research project.

Perhaps the most successful initiative that emerged was having East Scarborough officially recognized as a youth-friendly community by Play Works, a provincial umbrella organization of youth-serving groups. We worked for over three years – with three consecutive cohorts of students – on compiling the 1,000-page application.

For our community partners in East Scarborough, this youth-friendly recognition was never meant to be an end in itself; they wanted to create opportunities and structures for youth engagement. And one of the beauties of this project is that a youth group called LIFT – Let’s Inspire for Today – emerged. This group makes sure that youth voices are heard in community planning.

This initiative was a great learning experience for students, and I could also say to the community partner, “We did it and we did it together with you.” Everybody had their objectives met.

**For three years, up until recently, you served as special advisor to the dean on experiential education. How would you describe your role?**

One important dimension of my work was the institutional coordination of experiential learning activities, both at UTSC and in the tri-campus ecosystem. There’s really interesting, meaningful work happening in experiential learning in a lot of different pockets at UTSC, but having spaces to come together, to learn from one another and know who’s doing what allows us to engage with partners in a more coordinated fashion. A partner receives one phone call from the University of Toronto Scarborough, not five.

The second aspect would be incentivizing, nurturing and supporting experiential activities by a growing number of wonderful colleagues interested and dedicated to experiential learning. I was fortunate to have sufficient resources from the dean to do this kind of incentivizing.

**How would you describe the experiential learning experience at UTSC?**

If you look at the broader higher education landscape, community engagement is a hot topic. Many universities across North America are saying that they’re creating new programs that engage with outside partners. I think UTSC really stands out for its commitment to meaningfully, respectfully and reciprocally engaged community partners. Community development and engagement is not a fashion for us. We have fully embraced it and we’ve also nurtured it over the years with the appropriate level of institutional resources. Much credit goes to the director of community development and engagement Kimberley Tull and her team.

There is now a policy push to increase experiential learning. But it’s really important to listen very carefully to what partners are saying so that we avoid bulldozing into communities

saying, “Find places for our students because all of our students now need to have these experiences.” I think at UTSC we’ve really embraced the careful work of community development.

### **How did you become an urbanist?**

When I was in high school I wanted to become a high school teacher, but then I changed my mind and I wanted to become a journalist. I enrolled in media and communication studies at the Free University of Berlin in the mid-'90s.

I then stumbled upon a senior seminar that centred on the city and theories of communication of the city. It immediately spoke to me. We read classic urban theory text like Georg Simmel and Richard Sennett.

I’m from a relatively small town in Western Germany and after graduating from high school I wanted to live in a big city so I lived in Madrid and then in Berlin. I was drawn to the big city but I was never academically interested in the city. That one seminar was a turning point in my life, and it opened up urban theory to me.

Every course that I took after that was connected to the city. I worked it into literally every subject – from media and communication to political science. Even in Spanish literature, my minor, my oral examination was on contemporary urban literature.

I became an urbanist because it spoke to me. Urban theory allowed me to understand society in a very meaningful and insightful way. I applied for PhD programs with a focus on urban politics and urban theory. Then I was in the academic trajectory. And it goes full circle because I wanted to become a teacher all along.

### **What does this Teaching Award mean to you?**

I hope that this award is a point of departure for new collaborations and projects. I’d love to work with colleagues in Arts, Culture and Media and explore how applied theatre can be used for communicating community issues. Also, I love maps. I’m a geographer but I’m not a mapmaker. It would be a dream for me if, again, I could partner with Arts, Culture and Media so that we could combine the urban research piece with producing beautifully designed and community-generated maps and visuals.

### **What have you learned from your students?**

I'm continuously amazed by the critical insights that students have based on their lives and rich biographies – and also the generosity that they show in terms of sharing their insights and experiences with me. I really see my role as channelling that and bringing that into dialogue with the experiences of others and my own to advance knowledge.

I continuously learn from my students because they are willing to share what moves them, what affects them and how they are in the world. That is really what makes, rejuvenates and stimulates my passion in teaching. - *Stacey Gibson*

## UTSC Teaching Award recipient Suzanne Sicchia on the power of community



*Prof. Suzanne Sicchia (second from right) at the 2018 Annual International Health Film Series & Expo she organized. Pictured with Médecins Sans Frontières physicians and UTSC student organizers in the Meeting Place*

When Suzanne Sicchia – associate professor, teaching stream, in UTSC's Department of Health and Society – was designing her course on violence and health last year, it wasn't a solitary endeavour. She worked with Taibu, a community health centre dedicated to Black health and Black excellence in Scarborough, to create the course about structural violence and its impact on the health of racialized communities.

“People have told me, ‘It’s not normal to have community help you design your syllabus,’” says Sicchia, who is a recipient of a 2020 UTSC Teaching Award for excellence in the classroom. “But if you want the course to be relevant to the community – and the communities to which our students belong, then why not?”

The idea of collaboration, and of respecting others’ lived experiences, is ingrained in Sicchia’s teaching style. Her expertise is critical public health, which centres on equity, justice and social change to promote health and well-being. “What I’ve learned in my own training is context matters, and structure, hierarchies and inequities are present in people’s lives – although not in equal ways,” she says.

Sicchia talks about inequities in academia – and how she attempts to address them in the classroom. “Higher education is a meritocracy with winners and losers. But that’s not innate to people; that’s imposed upon them by the structure,” says Sicchia, who is cross-appointed to U of T’s Dalla Lana School of Public Health and is also associate chair, Undergraduate, Department of Health and Society. “So if you come to your classroom and you let students know who you are – the silly parts, the not-certain parts, the sad parts, the excited and committed parts, your failures and successes – they see when you are being authentically you. When you talk down to them or assume they’re not equipped, they pick up on it and they shy away from you – so you’ve immediately failed in your role as an educator.”

Sicchia adds: “What we study from a critical lens is the way society is structured to undermine some and benefit others. If that’s what you study, write about and read about, how can you come to the classroom and not live that? We need to walk our talk.”

Very early in her life, Sicchia started walking her talk and developed a deep-rooted ethos to helping her community. In high school, she created and published a newsletter that was for, and by, female survivors of violence and their supporters. “[I created it] mostly because I was coming to terms with violence in my own life and in the lives of some people I love and in my community,” she says.

Sicchia continued to be very active on issues around violence against women and girls. At York University, she wrote her undergraduate thesis on the impact of sex education curriculum on rape myth acceptance. After working at the Peel Committee Against Women Abuse, she earned a master of health science in health promotion at U of T which had a

strong focus on community development and social determinants of health. Her focus shifted from interpersonal violence to structural violence – how larger historic, political, economic and social conditions affect health and well-being – as a research associate at the former Centre for Research in Women’s Health in Toronto. “That’s the critical public-health lens that moves you upstream,” says Sicchia, who then earned a master of science in social theory and health at U of T.

It was during the last year of her PhD in medical science that Sicchia hit a dark period. Her scholarship funding ran out and “just by fluke, life got very complicated,” she says. “Those were some very rough times. My partner got very sick, he couldn’t work, I didn’t know how I would pay for my tuition and I couldn’t concentrate because I was so stressed about life.”

Her mentors, mostly female, rallied around her. One provided tuition support. Another offered her a quiet place in her home to work. Another bolstered her self-esteem: “I wasn’t a square peg for the square hole; I never quite fit,” says Sicchia. “She helped me understand that different wasn’t bad or poor quality; it was just different.”

Sicchia very carefully lists the names of people who helped her – from U of T professors who encouraged her in academia to workplace mentors – and angsts over leaving someone out. But she has honoured each of them by establishing the Suzanne R. Sicchia Scholarship for Women’s Health Research at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health. “My mentors inspired me to set up a scholarship for doctoral students in women’s health. That was really to pay forward the kindness that I was shown,” she says, her voice lilting. “I was super excited about it, because I knew I wanted to do it even as a graduate student.”

Circling back to the power of community, Sicchia talks about what she hopes students take away from her classes. “I want them to come away with a deeper understanding of their capacity to affect change in the world and to learn to have humility. If we’re going to address some of these wicked problems – whether its climate change or issues around Black Lives Matter or Indigenous rights – you can’t do it without critical social theory. But critical engagement also demands action: It’s not just thinking good thoughts for the sake of thinking them, or for the sake of publishing or for one’s personal growth and development. It is to join together to affect a change in the world to make it a more just and healthy place for all.”

She adds: “I don’t want students to feel helpless in the face of challenges. And certainly not

helpless in the face of their own lives and learning. But the way to *not* be helpless is by deep engagement with critical theory and evidence and always in communion with others. I want them to understand that they are not a lonely island. There's a sense of belonging that comes from building community, but also a power that comes when it's a 'we'. *That's* how real change happens." – *Stacey Gibson*

## UTSC Teaching Award recipient Heidi Daxberger talks about the "whoa" effect of geology



While Heidi Daxberger – assistant professor, teaching stream, in the department of Physical and Environmental Sciences at UTSC – is now fascinated by minerals, rocks and all things geological, she took a circuitous route to finding her career path.

After graduating from high school in her homeland of Germany, she worked for four years in a bank –but mundanity soon set in. “It was too much sitting at a desk concentrating on one thing,” says Daxberger, who recently received a UTSC Teaching Award in the Assistant Professors and Lecturers category.

Then she attended a Grade 1 school reunion where a former classmate mentioned she was studying geology. The classmate said, “The first thing you do is buy a hammer and then you

go on field trips.” Daxberger thought, “*And* it’s all about rocks. Hmmm, that sounds kind of fun.”

Daxberger signed up for geology at university. “The first day, first lecture, it was clear that it was a good fit.” She loved how hands-on it was, and became immersed in learning everything rock-related. Daxberger now passes on that passion to her students, teaching such courses as Earth History, Petrology and Structural Geology.

The shelves in Daxberger’s home office are chock full of rock samples from her lab. In pre-Covid times, she could often be spotted on UTSC campus, wheeling her trusty cart of rocks between classes. The tactile nature of geology, the physical act of handling and examining a wedge of schist or basalt or limestone, is a crucial component of teaching to Daxberger. “In geology everything is three-dimensional – in the field, as well as in the lab. It’s important to teach students how to look at rocks, and to imagine how a rock layer forms.”

Daxberger holds up models of pure-white deformed rocks she had created with a 3D printer. “Here are some shapes that we use for the Structural Geology course, where we talk about how rocks are deformed – how they get squeezed together, elongated,” she says. Often, students analyze deformations based on a picture, she says, but that requires them “to magically understand how it looks in 3D.” With these models, she notes, students can actually take measurements.

Daxberger’s commitment to a hands-on experience was challenged when the pandemic hit. She and her team went full throttle on the digital front, creating 3D virtual versions of her rock samples that students could rotate with a drag of a mouse. The images are so vivid that the viewer can see the shininess of grey glassy quartz and almost feel the ridges in a piece of desert-rose barite. “It still gives them an idea how it would look in multiple dimensions instead of just seeing the flat picture,” she says. Daxberger also added short instructional videos and Quercus quizzes to the mix.

“It took a long time to figure out the techniques to make the virtual 3D models. There were weeks of trial and error and just nothing. That was really the frustrating part,” she says. “But once it worked, it was awesome, because we can keep whatever we’ve made and reuse it in the future.”

The remote-learning shift extended to Daxberger’s field trips. These outdoor excursions are

vital to Daxberger as they allow students to see the breathtaking big picture and explore geology in the real world. Albion Falls in Hamilton, for example – with its large variety of cliffs and well exposed rock layers – was a favourite site of Daxberger’s until it was shut to the public in 2017. Because of this shutdown, she and her team had taken drone footage of the area intending to create a remote field trip. When the pandemic struck, they accelerated the process, and created a virtual excursion within three weeks. Along with UAV video footage, the team used 3D imagery, graphs, maps and close-up photos to allow students to explore renderings of outcrops and fossils. “Geology is traditionally very experiential-learning driven, and in the end, it is how it is best learned,” she says. “Students love it. It gets them more interested in the entire topic, and it’s so nice to see them when they say, ‘Oh, *that’s* how it looks in reality.’”

Daxberger is on sabbatical this year, and she is eager to continue her work in the virtual realm. She is collaborating with colleagues at UTM and McMaster University to digitize more items for the remote-learning toolkit and to create another virtual field trip. She also plans to amp up her designing and printing of 3D teaching objects and hopes to create short modules – and perhaps eventually an online course – centred on using 3D modelling software.

In the end, what Daxberger really wants for students is to awaken an awareness of the geology all around them, whether it be a pebble in the grass or majestic cliffs during a walk in nature. “For students in my introductory Earth Science class, I really want them to recognize that when they go outside, geology is everywhere. You can barely ignore it once you’ve seen it. There’s evidence of how our Earth developed over time everywhere.

“When they see layered rocks, they can tell, by what they learn in class, if it was eroded by water or ice or wind and what type of rock it is... for example, that the Escarpment is mostly all limestone, and that it was deposited under water, in the ocean, 400 million years ago.

“I also want to show them the vastness of geology and time: That we are tiny compared to all these rocks that are 400 million years old, and they’re right around us. That is the ‘whoa’ effect of geology.” – *Stacey Gibson*

## UTSC Teaching Award recipient Jason Brown teaches students how to think like scientists



When Jason Brown – assistant professor, teaching stream, in UTSC’s Department of Biological Sciences – entered grad school at Western University in London, Ontario, he would sit in seminars, nodding his head agreeably as speakers discussed their research findings. But then others would speak up with incisive questions: Was the experiment biased by how they conducted the research? Had they considered this other interpretation of their results? “I would think, ‘How could they even come up with these questions?’ All I was doing was accepting everything this person said as if it were God’s truth,” says Brown. “I realized that my undergrad training had not prepared me to be the critical thinker needed to be a successful graduate student and eventually an academic. I wanted to correct that. If I got into a position of teaching undergrads, I wanted to better prepare them.”

Brown recently won a UTSC Teaching Award in the Assistant Professors and Lecturers category – in part for cultivating critical-thinking skills in students. He eschews traditional memory-based tests in favour of Quercus quizzes and exams that push students to apply creative thought and higher-level analytical skills to their answers. A typical exam question, for example, includes a published finding followed by queries such as: “Are you surprised by this finding? How can it be explained by the principles you’ve learned?” When students apply their knowledge to real-life examples, the exam itself becomes an instrument for

learning, he says. “It’s not just an evaluative tool, now it’s a learning tool because they think, ‘Oh, I didn’t realize that I could apply this concept I learned in class in this other way, and now it helps to explain some phenomena we’ve never discussed.’ It leads to these little Eureka moments for students, which are so important in science. They can do it in the context of an exam.”

Brown’s teaching philosophy is centred on helping students shift to a scientific mindset. “It’s about trying to change the way the students *think*. I say to my students, a scientist is someone who looks at the world around them and tries to explain what they’re seeing based on what they know. And so that’s what you should be learning how to do as you progress through this program.”

Biology wasn’t an early passion that Brown pursued; rather, a series of small moments led him down the path. In Grade 10, his family bought their first computer, which came with a Microsoft Encarta encyclopedia on disc. Brown watched an animation on it about how DNA replication occurred, and recalls thinking: “This is really cool, how this whole process works to faithfully transmit my genes to the next generation.” He adds, “It was just that wow factor that really caught my attention.” He applied for biology at university after doing well in a Grade 12 course, but adds: “I’ve just grown to become more and more in love with biology as time goes on.”

Brown’s first experience teaching was also a bit serendipitous. In his third year as a biology undergrad at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, he noticed a flyer seeking TAs for first-year labs and thought he’d give it a shot. “I looked forward to my week, to being in the laboratory working with these first-year students and helping them to really learn biology and get excited about it,” he says. After grad school, he taught at Georgian College in Barrie, Ontario, then accepted a part-time position at UTSC teaching animal physiology. He has taught 10 different courses in the past seven years. “I just kept embracing all these experiences,” he says. “The doors kept opening and I kept going through them.”

Over the past five years, Brown has been supervising fourth-year undergrad students who are researching plant aging. He and his students recently submitted their first paper for publication, and he hopes to consistently turn out papers from here on in. “I think carving out research space within this kind of teaching position has been a bit unique,” he says, noting that they aren’t working with a full-time researcher.

Brown is also in the midst of his first pedagogical study: He and Prof. Aarthi Ashok – teaching stream, Biological Sciences and Associate Chair, Teaching and Undergraduate Affairs – have created a poster project for second-year biology students. The idea is that students – who approach a topic from various biological perspectives to create a poster – learn to work as a team, communicate to a scientific audience, search literature and build literacy skills. Through surveys, Profs. Ashok and Brown are assessing if the project leads to an improvement in these abilities. The project is being run online this year, and they hope to conduct it in person next year to compare how it affects skill-building.

Brown’s biggest priority, however, remains focused on fostering the critical-thinking skills in students that he himself struggled to learn. “I really hope that students take away a mindset shift from my class. A lot of them do come back later and say, ‘I really started to change my approach to education because of you and I no longer see it as having to stay up all night memorizing things to do well on an exam, but rather me trying to learn how to be a scientist, to think concepts through.’ I really hope most students change the way they approach their education.” – *Stacey Gibson*

## Professor Stuart Livingstone talks about the power of diverse voices in tackling environmental issues

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In his rec room, visible during a Zoom interview, Prof. Stuart Livingstone is surrounded by a musician's hardware: two Epiphone guitars hang from the wall, and a case for his guitar-effects pedals is perched on an amp. A songwriter and guitarist who toured with his band in a "past life," he now centres his passion on environmental issues as an invasion ecologist. He researches methods of curbing dog-strangling vine – the aggressive plant that snakes its way around young trees and other greenery, stifling forest regeneration. Livingstone, an assistant professor, teaching stream, in UTSC's Department of Physical and Environmental Sciences, loves to take his students out to Rouge National Urban Park to delve into hands-on projects. He also brings diverse voices into the classroom to discuss respectful ways of dealing with complicated environmental issues. For his work, Livingstone received a 2020 UTSC Teaching Award in the Unit 3 Sessional Lecturers category.

**You currently teach a professional scientific literacy class and a conservation policy class in environmental science. How do you maintain positivity in the face of complex, often dispiriting, environmental issues?**

In past years, I've taken students out to locations where there is positive action happening on the ground. We're lucky at UTSC to have Rouge National Urban Park right at our doorstep. That's where I've done the bulk of my research and I've had the opportunity to bring my classes there to engage in ecological restoration. I think that's a great way to maintain positivity. Students can get their hands dirty and in 10 years time they can go back to these places and see the positive impact that they've had.

I also love to bring in guest speakers who are on the land or behind their desks working on the policy that's having an impact on the environment broadly. You really have to take extra time to identify these positive actions. It can be tough: Twitter, for one, can be a dumpster fire of negativity.

One of our past guest speakers was UTSC professor Nicole Latulippe, who provided a deep historical perspective on Indigenous issues in Canada as it's being carried forward into efforts in reconciliation. And this term, I'm lucky to be able to bring in somebody from the Indigenous Guardians, an Environment Canada pilot program where funding is being made available to Indigenous groups to engage in conservation action.

We're sometimes deeply entrenched in looking at an economic perspective on how

society's moving forward and bringing in Indigenous voices and alternative perspectives on human relations with the environment provides essential, diverse voices and is a great foundation for positive action.

### **During remote learning, how do you help mitigate the loss of these hands-on opportunities and in-person speakers?**

I picked up a GoPro video camera and I'm going out – socially distanced and masked – to meet guest speakers in relevant locations. We have a live Q&A session during class time and a supplementary video. I recently went out with Colin Cassin, an analyst with the Invasive Species Centre, in his boat on Lake Scugog near Port Perry where that ecosystem is faced with several problematic invasive species. Colin was able to speak to specific examples in that ecosystem and some emergent policy.

I think it's important to create diverse experiences for the students where they're not just looking at streamed PowerPoints each week; to get out into the field and show them video of the places that I'm talking about.

### **How did you become interested in environmental science and in teaching?**

I came back to school as a mature student to finish my undergrad at the downtown campus. I took a couple of conservation biology classes and they sparked my drive to move forward with that subject matter for a PhD.

My PhD supervisor Marc Cadotte saw potential in me to be an instructor. My mom is a teacher, but it wasn't something that I envisioned myself doing when I was younger. At first, I was fairly terrified to do so. But once I stepped into it and realized that I was able to articulate complicated environmental issues and how we understand them scientifically, I gained more confidence. It took a couple years for me to settle in to teaching, and since then it's become a great passion.

### **What projects you are working on?**

Prof. Marc Cadotte and I recently had a paper accepted on evidence-based conservation, where those who are teaching this material are compiling an open-access database. This speaks to the broader trend of transparency in science and the accessibility of material.

I'm also working as a postdoctoral researcher with U of T professor Marie-Josée Fortin. Our project is investigating protected-area network connectivity but from an invasion ecology perspective. Typically, across the landscape, we think about improving habitat connectivity for migration – but that connectivity can also facilitate the movement of undesirable elements of biodiversity. We're looking at various forms of connectivity – including habitats across the landscape *and* human land use, such as transportation networks or energy networks – which can facilitate hyperabundance of native species and invasive species.

I also have a podcast, called [Emerging Environments](#), launching soon. It is co-hosted by Karen Smith, assistant professor, teaching stream, Department of Physical and Environmental Sciences. We have already interviewed two U of T profs and will also be talking to people from other universities and environmental organizations. It will be available on your favourite podcast app on April 22.

### **What do you love most about teaching?**

The discussions are what I like the most. Each year, I pick out some emergent topics and studies from environmental-science literature and give these to the class as readings. I'm really delving into this material at the same time that the students are. Many of the students come from different backgrounds or have different perspectives on a topic. The discussion sections of class are fascinating, and I'm often enlightened by others' experiences.

I also like developing assignments for students – and especially during remote learning. I think alternative ways of engaging with students' knowledge and alternative evaluation methods are vital now. Writing an exam at home with somebody looking at you through your Webcam not an ideal way to be evaluated, so I've tried to develop, for instance, essay assignments that require students to delve into the literature and understand complex policy interactions. – *Stacey Gibson*