

What's Going on in the Wild West?

Four Public Secondary Schools that Offer Integrated Curriculum Outdoor Education Programs

– Kelly J.C. Comishin and Tom Potter, Ph.D.

British Columbia and the Yukon Territory...a land where the mountain tops reach up to the skies; where the ocean skirts along the rugged rainforest coasts; where the desert slithers up the Okanagan Valley; where rivers and lakes carve through canyons and fields. British Columbia and the Yukon Territory...a place beholding diverse ecosystems beckoning educators and students to learn in. With such a diversity of natural areas, it seems unreasonable that the experiential learning opportunities in the outdoors for students in BC is not extensive across the province. Furthermore, the BC Ministry of Education (MOE) has no set curriculum that includes the integration of outdoor education as a course, or even as a means to teach other courses (e.g. earth science, geography, history, English, biology, etc.). As a part of a study in Western Canada, we researched public secondary schools that offer integrated curriculum programs in an outdoor, experiential setting. Three such schools reside in British Columbia and one school is in the Yukon; each school beholds a unique set of methods to teach traditional subjects through the outdoors. This article characterizes each of these integrated curriculum outdoor education (ICOE) programs to publicize the attributes of these incredible schools that managed to emerge from a fairly unsupportive provincial education system.

Integrated Curriculum applied to the outdoors is a blending of skills and knowledge from a number of traditional subjects to be presented through a holistic teaching approach in the outdoor classroom whereby the students gain credit for the integrated subjects. Integrated curriculum is a curriculum where the students cannot discern between subject material because the lessons of each subject are intermeshed, as in life. The following four ICOE programs are unique to the mainstream education system because the programs have adopted the theory of integrated curriculum and applied it to the lessons that reside in nature. Molded by the educators who have a vested interest in alternative forms of education, the ICOE programs are a result of the commitment and dedication to improve the education system that fails so many.

Integrated Curriculum Outdoor Education Program Profiles

Each ICOE program shares the common denominator of providing a number of outdoor educational experiences that grant academic credit for core subjects required for graduation. A familiarity with the following four western schools will likely inspire those educators who believe in the benefits of diversifying the educational opportunities for the various learning types. Profiling these programs is the first step in bringing forth greater awareness of the various paths that can be taken if one should embark upon the design and development of an ICOE program in his/her local school district.

TREK, Prince of Wales School, Vancouver, BC

The grade 10 TREK program started in 1987 after a controversial breakdown of the original Quest program that was established in 1974. The program integrates English 10, Physical Education 10, and Social Studies 10, by adopting the outdoors and the

community as the classroom where the lessons of the disciplines can be learned simultaneously. TREK emphasizes lessons that speak of environmental education, and therefore apply many projects and activities that relate to current environmental issues. For example, TREK has a unit called Garbology, which is the study of garbage: where it comes from; where it goes; and, how long it takes to decompose. Within this unit the class will go to the landfill, and study the impacts refuse has on the adjacent bog ecosystem. During the semester the students will do a series of day and multi-day trips traveling by hiking boots, canoes, sea kayaks, rock climbing shoes, skis (Nordic and backcountry) and/or snowshoes.

One of four teachers at TREK, Dave Ewert, who recently moved to a new school district, was the pillar of the TREK program for the past 10 years. His dedication to TREK is a result of the thrill he attains from seeing students get excited about the activities they are involved in. He is a firm believer in life-long learning because “that’s what education should be about.” Dave’s passion for the outdoors has encouraged him to fit this passion into his profession. Integrating the academic curriculum was not his primary motivation for outdoor education. After time and experience Dave realized the eminent value of giving the students the chance to find meaningful lessons in nature and the community. “If you can get the kids excited and motivated about learning then you’ve overcome the biggest part of the battle. You get students with tremendous loyalty to you and to a program that they recognize the value in”.

Experiential Science, Wood Street School, Whitehorse, Yukon

The grade 11 Experiential Science (ES) class is one of six integrated curriculum programs in the Wood Street School. Although the Yukon Department of Education adopts the BC curriculum for grades 11 and 12, the Yukon government has an entirely different mandate for experiential education. The education mandate of the Yukon is to encourage experiential programs in schools and offer a variety of types of education; therefore, programs like Experiential Science materialized from the Ministerial level. The Wood Street School has integrated curriculum experiential education programs for grades 9-12. Food, nutrition, tourism and services are a few of the courses that make up the grade 10-12 program called FEAST. Music, Arts and Drama is the focus of the MAD program that is offered at the Grade 9-10 and 11-12 levels. OPES and PASE are grade 9 outdoor pursuits and science based programs offered in English and in French. ACES, the grade 10 program, focuses on culture, the environment and leadership. Finally, the grade 11 program, Experiential Science, is a highly academic program that integrates BC’s Chemistry, Biology, Geography, Fine Arts, Career Preparation, and Applied Skills Field Studies courses into labs, classrooms and the outdoors, The students spend a majority of their time working on field projects for the government and other agencies, as well as participate in a 30 day field trip across BC and Alberta. This field trip involves scuba diving, sailing, sea kayaking and hiking to name a few of the activities.

Bob Sharp, the principle teacher of ES, has a powerful energy that fuelled the creation of an incredible program that enabled hundreds of students to experience the real world through applied responsibilities. His experiences in small First Nations communities in the Yukon, his background in national competitive sports, his past positions in the Yukon Department of Education and his education in Chemistry, Biology and many other disciplines make him an eclectic teacher; a characteristic Bob believes is

a necessary quality to teach an integrated curriculum. Bob is an animated character who has dedicated a large part of his career to reforming education to match the natural orders of Yukon first Nation communities. “In towns like Ross River, with kids who had lost one or both parents...[as a teacher] you’ve got to realize it can’t just be the school, it’s got to be the community that works to help these situations.”

Earthquest Outdoor School, Vernon Secondary School, Vernon, BC

Located in southern BC, Earthquest (EQ) is in a perfect position for the students to explore the trails, water or snow to discover how school and learning fit into the “real” world. The main focus of this program is not to make fantastic backcountry skiers, paddlers, hikers, cyclers or climbers; it is to provide students with personal and professional direction, build self-esteem and leadership skills, and to become more responsible citizens. Earthquest facilitators mentor these lessons through the aforementioned outdoor activities. The program is unique in its application of native studies into an integrated curriculum. The school uses an outdoor site for the majority of its classes. A typical day at the site consists of students working on various projects, such as native beading, tanning hides, building kekulis, or working on cedar root baskets, all of which are due at the end of the semester. The students graduate from this grade 11 program with Social Studies, Career Preparation, Fine Arts, Earth Science and Physical Education credits.

Famous for his youthful spirit and his inspiring wisdom, Barry Reid is the founder of EQ. Barry has built every step and climbed each one to get the program that he and his wife Moe lead together. The opportunity to create a program that fits with both Moe and Barry’s personality allowed these two phenomenal educators to exercise their philosophies on mentoring, critical thinking, responsibility, exploration, and letting people make mistakes they can learn from. Barry and Moe have a genuine passion for the outdoors and for how cultures fit within the landscape. Barry is the first to say that it’s not about getting the hard skills, it’s about discovering one’s self and overcoming inhibitions to let the learning be natural. “You don’t have to be a genius to run a program like Earthquest. But you have to know when to become a mentor and a guide and when to let the kids take some responsibility. This [responsibility] lets them go way beyond what I could ever give them”.

Environmental Awareness Program (EAP), Mount Baker Secondary School, Cranbrook, BC

Integrating Social Studies 11, Biology 11, English 11 and Outdoor Skills 11 (locally developed Physical Education), EAP is the most recent ICOE program to be offered in the BC public school system. Students who apply for this program take part in a winter camp, a backpacking trip, a number of day and multi-day canoe trips, and in the past years, a sea kayaking trip on the BC coast. The program takes advantage of the local area to explore old historical routes of explorers and prospectors and becomes very involved in the community through 100 hours of volunteer career preparation within various industries (primarily resource/outdoor based).

Cam Trueman, creator of EAP, is a person of passion instilled with a profound appreciation for nature. His adventuresome spirit has taken himself, his family and hundreds of students up mountains, down rivers and across flat waters. Originally from

southern Ontario, Cam realized the incredible opportunities for the mountains to teach lifetime lessons. Family being one of the most important adventures in his life, Cam loves involving his wife Sandy and his three children in many of the trips with EAP. His students have an incredible opportunity to experience adventures with his family and, as a result, the group grows to be a family. Cam is driven to share his spark, his humour and his knowledge for the outdoors with anyone. “I think this idea to plant the seed and let the seed grow is key. When they [the students] see you passionate they know how to develop their own passion. You get to be there from ground zero and help them develop that”.

These four unique programs provide students of four small regions of BC and the Yukon with the opportunity to learn about life outside of the walls of the classroom and outside the lines of textbooks. There is much to learn from these alternative types of education. In a world where change in systems is both daunting and exhausting stands these four programs that provide the backbone for future ICOE program development. Change is possible and integrated curriculum outdoor education is a reality; it is attainable by those who seek to teach and learn through integrated lessons that grow and live in the outdoors!

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