

Secondary School Integrated Programs (IPs): Evolutionary Directions for Learning

By Stan Kozak

In the 1970s, Ontario secondary schools started to adopt the semester system, four courses over the day where there had been seven. With this change a creative outdoor educator realized one teacher could take a group of students for all four credits, eliminating the restrictions of the timetable and addressing opportunities to learn in the real world all day, every day, for the whole semester. Thus was born the secondary school Integrated Program (IP) model. Through it, the innovation that semestering provided was no doubt extended well beyond what was intended. Decades later these early steps are providing a promising avenue for secondary school reform.

Formal learning is under mounting pressures to change. The need of education to prepare a more engaged citizenry has never been greater—hence the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (www.unesco.ca/en/interdisciplinary/ESD/default.aspx). Information technology is eliminating mid-level information brokers. It even has its own term: disintermediation. Travel agents are now few. Stick to information delivery models and the same fate may fall on teachers. Finally there is mounting convergence of our understanding of how people best learn, yet there is a chasm in implementation, so great that one might ask, can the formal education system learn?

Yet a recent survey¹ of IPs in Ontario found that the model is holding its own and has expanded into areas far beyond outdoor and environmental education. The survey was directed at programs with two to four credits integrated on any theme. Over 50 responses were gathered; however, of as much interest was the indication that another 100 or so programs exist in Ontario that use the IP model, but not the traditional outdoor or environmental integration themes.

Tracking IPs is a challenge. There is no comprehensive list. Nomenclature is a problem since a number of names are

used: integrated programs, environmental leadership programs, focus programs and package programs are a few.

The survey and the work that went along with it reveal the model is alive and bubbling along just below the radar. The scope of programs includes integrating two to five credits and addressing three broad areas of student need: leadership development, career exploration and at-risk student and Aboriginal student retention. A wide range of integrating themes is used including outdoor education, environmental leadership, the arts and health.

Respondents to the survey were mostly from the environmental and outdoor education theme areas, reflecting a survey bias, the result of the communication networks accessed. However, in the search process, examples of what are possible came to light. Limestone Board of Education has been supporting focus programs (<http://focus.limestone.on.ca/>) with mostly a career emphasis for over 20 years. Over 800 students move between 13 secondary schools each semester following their interests in over 40 programs. Meanwhile, a relatively new initiative shows what can be done at a single secondary school: Fletcher Meadows Secondary School in Brampton (www.fmss.ca/departments/departments/departments/ap2.html) has had up to 13 integrated programs with an at-risk student population focus operating during the academic year.

The IP model has evolved from the dominant form of school organization. Of note is the fact that the model has survived some challenging times in Ontario and now seems to be slowly expanding beyond its base, without much if any formal support or recognition at the Ministry of Education level. Despite some serious difficulties identified by survey respondents (funding, lack of professional development, communication), this model is a survivor. Why?



The model and those applying it use key learning strategies arising from many fields of education. Of particular relevance is the creation of communities of learners who support each other in engaging learning activities that, in turn, often take place in the communities in which they learn.

The IP model has spread far beyond its OE (outdoor education) roots and has the potential to lead secondary school reform. The original intent of that first outdoor educator was to get students learning outside. This model, however, is pointing in a direction that can take formal learning beyond our greatest expectations and help meet the challenges we face.

Note

¹ The survey is still open; see (www.surveymonkey.com/s/FT597SH). The design and research work of Jen Mason and Shanon Zachidniak are gratefully acknowledged. The survey was conducted as part of the activity of a provincial working group of the Educational Alliance for a Sustainable Ontario with the support of Learning for a Sustainable Future and the Gosling Foundation.

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