

Creative Curriculum Integration in Atlantic Canada: A “MindShift”

By Alan Warner and Cate de Vreede

Curriculum integration through block programs has not taken hold in Atlantic Canada, but another approach has blossomed in Nova Scotia that is achieving some of the key benefits—interdisciplinary, holistic and problem-based learning, student engagement, community building, collaborative relationships and real-world experiences. If block programs are not the best or viable choice for a school or community, consider a “MindShift.” This is the name of a high-school sustainability education program operating in a half-dozen high schools in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It utilizes a youth team model to achieve similar benefits.

In the youth team approach, a volunteer team of high-school students, with a supporting teacher/coach, delivers a peer education program as part of relevant high-school courses, in this case science or global geography. Whereas a block program integrates a number of courses under a theme within the curriculum, the youth team model combines and connects extracurricular experience with curriculum learning. It provides the intense experience for the students on the leadership team while also involving a broader and larger group of students in the educational experience. MindShift was designed by a team of young people with support from the Halifax Regional Adventure Earth Centre and won the 2009 Nova Scotia Youth Environmental award. In 2011, a Halifax youth team visited Quebec and Ontario, presenting the program and doing workshops on implementation in high schools, which, in turn, are sprouting new MindShift programs. This article describes the program as an example of the youth team model, presents brief research findings from student interviews and considers ways the model could be developed further within the curriculum.

MindShift and the Youth Team Model

In the fall of 2007, a group of seven high-school environmental leaders and several supportive adults associated with the Halifax Regional Adventure Earth Centre, a community youth leadership and environmental education centre, sat down to consider how they could facilitate integrated environmental learning, awareness and action with high-school youth. The goal was to engage a broad spectrum of high-school students in curriculum-based experiences using experiential programming. As high-school students, the youth deeply understood that learning in their standard high-school curriculum paled in comparison to the benefits of their previous outdoor program participation and leadership. Appreciating the apathy prevalent in many high-school classes, the youth team recognized the need to work “outside the box” to achieve a substantial impact. A year of working together, writing and piloting in their high schools, resulted in MindShift.

The youth attended three separate schools, and gained support for the development of a MindShift youth leadership team in each school under the auspices of a teacher/coach. The team has two roles:

1. *Deliver the MindShift Presentation:* This presentation powerfully engages teens in the magnitude and importance of our sustainability problems, while presenting them with the opportunities to take action and work toward solutions. It begins with the youth team bursting into a darkened classroom in costume with the support of music and multimedia, transforming it into the deck of the Starship Earth. As the ship travels through time from the year 1890 to 2030, the ship’s captain and six lieutenants monitor and report on its life-support systems based on actual scientific data. Despite dire warnings, the ship stays on its destructive course and crashes dramatically

in the year 2030. The actors then awaken to their everyday world that has not reached the point of destruction. They present a series of humorous skits that translate the large environmental problems into actions applicable to the everyday lives of teens: the morning bathroom routine, chemistry class, lunchtime, shopping, and so on. In each skit a “shift” is made from less to more sustainable choices to identify how students can alter their lifestyles to achieve a more sustainable future. The presentation concludes with each leader facilitating a small group discussion with students that reflects on the presentation and its implications for their lifestyles. While the classroom teacher has curriculum follow-up materials to carry the concepts forward in subsequent classes, the youth leaders invite the participants to join or assist the MindShift team in putting on sustainability events for the school as an extracurricular process across subsequent months.

2. Organize Sustainability Events: The work to define, plan and put on sustainability events over time generates learning in a range of subject areas and spheres for team members and the students that join them. Events have included turning the power off in the school for a whole day (with school approval!), sustainable food lunches, film festivals and clothing swaps. For example, a sustainable food lunch discussion produces a range of interdisciplinary learning, whether it is understanding sustainable agricultural practices or basic budgeting, or developing leadership or facilitation skills. The processes are supported and monitored by the teacher/coach. The program materials include an events organization guide and ‘zine to help provide structure and ideas for the team and coach.

MindShift is now in its fourth year, operating in seven high schools, and the processes and structures have evolved over time to capitalize on successes and address challenges. One key element in the support process has been a one-day training session that brings together MindShift youth leaders from multiple schools in the region. They experience the performance and then engage

in workshops to organize their team process. An Adventure Earth Centre staff person works with each high school to help obtain and support the teacher/coach. A couple of schools now have strong embedded MindShift teams that have succeeded over years, others have succeeded one year and not the next, and still others have faltered in their first year. The ingredients for success can be summed up as follows: “The students make it happen, the teacher makes it continue.” In two schools, an effective teacher has ensured continued success over years. Several teams have had lots of success in a given year, only to have the key student leaders graduate and little happen the next year. In other cases, some teachers have struggled to recruit and support teams.

Before examining the challenges, it is important to highlight MindShift’s impact where it has been successful. In 2009–2010, questionnaires were administered at the beginning and end of the year to 23 of 25 student leaders on three teams, and in-depth taped interviews were conducted with them midway through the year and at year-end. Detailed qualitative analysis assessed student learning and self-reports.

Student Learning

The research documented leader gains across six areas: pro-environmental behaviour, leadership skills, empowerment, pro-environmental attitudes and values, sustainability knowledge and interpersonal relationships. A few examples demonstrate the depth and breadth of impacts.

All 23 leaders reported making multiple pro-environmental changes in their lifestyles over the year, averaging five per person. Rebecca explains:

The little things, the habits, like turning off the lights, and . . . unplugging things, . . . I feel like those started when I first joined MindShift. Ah, I need to be as MindShifty as possible! But then things like cutting back on eating meat and biking to places, . . . taking the bus . . . all the bigger

things have developed in the past couple months. . . . [T]he more involved I got with MindShift, the more I transferred it over to a more permanent habit.

Increased awareness and knowledge of sustainability issues was expressed by 90 percent of the leaders.

[MindShift has] shown me . . . there are a lot of things happening on this Earth today . . . that most people don't really pay attention to . . . and I think that by doing this program and trying to find these things so that you can then teach them definitely opens your eyes to what's happening and what you can do to change that.

All of the leaders expressed a greater sense of empowerment as exemplified by their desire to take action and the sense that they had the skills and confidence to contribute to their team, school and communities. One student explained:

MindShift involves . . . youth showing confidence and youth showing how they actually know what's going on in the world and they actually have an opinion and that they want to do something about it . . . Adults just kind of say "oh . . . they're just taking up space," but we have an opinion, we know what's going on and we want something done about it.

The research concluded that MindShift, as an example of the youth team approach, had a powerful impact on the learning of young people on successful teams.

Enhancing the Youth Team Model within the Curriculum

One could use this approach to integrate learning relative to other social issues, e.g., social inequity and poverty, bullying and youth violence, or sex education and gender roles.

A key to success is choosing an issue youth care about and providing them with structured, integrated and holistic

experiences in which they can lead others in a supportive team context. This combines the interpersonal benefits of a successful sports team or arts performance with specific subject- and curriculum-related learning. The integrated experiences parallel what is achieved in successful block programs but they occur largely as extracurricular activities outside of the formal class setting.

The key challenge has been obtaining the core teacher/coach support to enable teams to form and continue over time. Gaining teacher support is greatly complicated by having the team be extracurricular such that the work becomes a volunteer effort for the teacher instead of part of the teaching load. It would be far easier if a keen teacher could run MindShift in a course or as an integrated block of courses across a term (e.g., leadership and environmental science). This would be simpler to implement relative to a full, integrated term program in settings where departing from standard course models faces major approval or resource issues. Whatever the limitations and obstacles, when we listened to the words of the students, we recognized similar types of transformational impacts to those reported by integrated block programs. There is more than one approach to integrated experiential learning in high schools. A high-school senior sums it up:

What am I [most proud of]? . . . It is not often that you get to take an idea or concept and get to show it to everyone. I mean, . . . you can present to a class for a project . . . but with MindShift . . . you are affecting a lot more people than you would with anything else.

For more information on MindShift, visit www.earthed.ns.ca/mindshift/.

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