

Integrated Curriculum Programs in British Columbia

By Julie Johnston

Although I grew up and trained to be a teacher in Ontario, most of my teaching career has been in Western Canada. So when this opportunity came up to talk about British Columbia's integrated curriculum programs (ICPs), I jumped at the chance to show them off.

In this province of sea and mountains, can you guess what figures prominently in our ICPs? You guessed it: outdoor adventures—with a healthy dose of environmental and sustainability education mixed in. Here are five examples from BC.

Earthquest Outdoor School, Vernon

(www.earthquest.ca)

Earthquest (EQ) is known as BC's longest-running ICP. It was established in 1981 as a five-month outdoor immersion program offered to 20 Grade 11 students per semester in School District 22 in Vernon (in the Okanagan area). Founders of the program, Moe and Barrie Reid (a wife and husband team), believed that "relevant and meaningful learning takes place in the best possible classroom: the outdoors." A main objective of the program is "to make learning enjoyable and engaging by removing students from the confines of the traditional classroom and integrating outdoor activities as tools for learning."

These days, EQ gives credit for English 11, Biology 11 and Physical education 11 and 12. Because of its collaboration with the school district's online learning program (called Vlearn), EQ is now able to accept Grade 12 students, who can take other courses as well or instead (Digital Media 12, First Nations Studies 12, Geography 12, English 12, Foods 12 and Independent Directed Studies 12). Students study online (when and where they want), fitting their studies around 9–10 weeks with EQ, in pre-expedition learning and then expeditions spread throughout the semester.

EQ students get credit for a variety of expeditions that take them "from the greatest

of heights on untouched mountains to the serene beaches of the Pacific coast:"

- surfing
- telemark skiing in the backcountry
- lake, river and ocean kayaking
- low-impact camping
- hiking
- rock climbing
- cycling
- cross-country running
- orienteering
- yoga

The program is taught with the environment in mind, allowing students to develop a sense of kinship with the rest of nature. Early on, Moe and Barrie established trusting relationships with local First Peoples, so an environmental consciousness is established by weaving First Nations technologies, philosophies, stewardship and lifestyles into outdoor adventures.

Diversity is a motif running throughout the EQ program; students are exposed to a variety of stimulating learning environments, landscapes, physical settings, social situations and challenges. Teamwork, responsibility and group accountability are promoted at every turn: adopting a group mentality while hiking and skiing, working together as a group practising kayak or beacon rescues, packing a doubles kayak, teaming up with a partner to perform a wet exit, belaying a classmate as they rock climb and preparing a nutritious meal together for the rest of the group are examples of the Outward Bound-like nature of EQ.

Saturna Ecological Education Centre (SEEC), Saturna Island

(www.seec64.ca)

The SEEC Semester for senior secondary students is the ICP I know best. That's because I've taken my own Pender Island students camping at the Saturna Ecological Education Centre many times, and because in 2010–2011 I helped expand the program by

recruiting students beyond our small school district's borders.

The SEEC Semester began in 2006 when Steve Dunsmuir, the principal/teacher of Saturna Island's tiny school, recognized that an alternative high-school program would keep the elementary school from closing. (Enrolment has gone as low as four children in this community of 300 people!)

Perhaps the niftiest thing about the SEEC Semester is that its Grade 11 and 12 participants, who come from several surrounding school districts, only spend three days (and three nights) on Saturna, but they take five courses and earn 20 credits:

- English 11 or 12 (Environmental Communication)
- Science and Technology 11 (Ecological Citizenship)
- Physical Education 11 or 12 (Outdoor Adventures)
- Teaching and Learning 11 or 12 (a locally developed elective course; students mentor the younger children at the school, and learn how to lead eco-adventures when groups visit from off-island)
- Independent Directed Study (IDS; Community Connections)

It is the IDS that sits at the centre of the students' integrated coursework. They can follow a passion or choose a new skill or area of knowledge (related somehow to any Grade 11 or 12 course offered by the Ministry of Education) to study with the help of a community mentor. Local folks love the program for the youthful energy it brings to their island, so they are happy to lend their mentoring time and wisdom. Past examples of IDS projects include

- designing and building a shed for the school
- writing and directing a play at the community level
- creating a field guide for a local beach
- learning and teaching about sheep farming

- taking command as coxswain of a Spanish longboat
- designing and sewing a dress for prom

The SEEC Semester is an excellent example of 21st-century learning: personalized, self-directed, co-created and integrated; place-based and sustainability-focused; challenging students to develop creative and critical thinking skills. Students (8 to 12 each semester) stay in rustic but funky off-grid cabins in a valley behind a working farm and use the whole island as their classroom. Dunsmuir admits, "It's kind of exciting because they come off the ferry and it's so different—it rocks their world a little bit."

The TREK Program, Vancouver

(www.vsb.bc.ca/programs/trek-program-prince-wales)

The Vancouver School Board's best-known and best-loved ICP is TREK, a year-long program for Grade 10 students. It began in 1987 to provide students with opportunities to learn outdoor skills, study environmental issues and develop personal and leadership skills. Even before the term "sustainability education" was coined, the TREK program was founded "on the belief that outdoor adventure and experiential education, combined with academic work and a bioregional overview, will allow students to develop their skills, confidence and leadership, connect them to the landscape they live in and educate them about what they can do to move towards living sustainably."

TREK's 100+ students are divided into two groups. For half the year, one group is "on-TREK" while the other group is "off-TREK," and then they switch for the second semester. By the end of the year, all students have met all Grade 10 requirements. Here's how it works:

- During the on-TREK term, students are involved in a combination of outdoor activities, field studies, trips and classroom-based academics including
- English 10 (half the course)
 - Social Studies 10 (half the course)

- Planning 10 (half the course)
- Physical Education 10 (complete course)
- Outdoor Education (complete course)

During this semester, about half the time is spent on field trips of up to a full week, and half the time is based at Prince of Wales Secondary School.

In the off-TREK term, students complete their academic curriculum including

- English 10 (half the course)
- Social Studies 10 (half the course)
- Planning 10 (half the course)
- Math 10 (complete course)
- Science 10 (complete course)
- a second language (French or Spanish)

Can you imagine the logistics? According to TREK's Antony Blaikie, due to the depth and breadth of the program, there are logistical challenges to be met nearly every day by the program's four teachers. But, he adds that the rewards must continue to outweigh the costs, because TREK teachers remain in the position for an average of seven to eight years. And hundreds of students apply to TREK every year, so the program must be meeting its goal of providing a rich source of learning, adventure and rewarding relationships for young people.

Coast Mountain Academy, Powell River
(www.outdoors.sd47.bc.ca)

Coast Mountain Academy (CMA) is an enriched outdoor education program ("a five-month rite of passage") that focuses on action education, service learning and character and career development through "Leadership, Citizenship and Outdoor Adventure." The program accepts Grade 11 and 12 students from across British Columbia for a unique semester-long program that includes an emphasis on outdoor certifications and community service, along with academic credits and hard skills.

The CMA, which runs during the second semester from Monday to Thursday, gives students opportunities to combine practical and theoretical learning while immersed

in the natural beauty of the Sunshine Coast and Desolation Sound areas. As coordinator Ryan Barfoot explains, "We are located in a beautiful area where the snow-capped mountains meet the ocean. This is the canvas we paint our semester on." Cohorts of 14 students experience paddling, climbing, hiking, biking, boating and working with younger students. The final project requires students to design, plan and implement a month of residential camp programs for all of the Grade 7 students in the school district.

The CMA started as a local tourism-training program with a strong focus on hard skills, and now also incorporates a stronger leadership component as well as citizenship. Taught by a team of teachers, industry leaders and experts, students get senior secondary elective credits in Physical Education 11 or 12, Work Experience 11 or 12, Adventure Tourism 11 and 12, and Leadership Studies 11 or 12. The CMA may also offer the following certifications:

- Outdoor Leadership Skills
- Flat Water Sea Kayak, Paddle Canada
- Level 1 Sea Kayak, Paddle Canada
- Wilderness First Aid (40 hours)
- Occupational First Aid
- Foodsafe
- Avalanche Safety Training Level 1
- VHF Radio Operator, Industry Canada
- Small Craft Operator, Coast Guard
- Toastmasters
- Streamkeepers, Counsellor in Training

The CMA has become something of a gift to the community of Powell River. Other organizations in town often make requests for assistance with various projects, which keeps the curriculum dynamic. The program resides where theory and application meet, and students learn that knowledge in and of itself is valuable, but it is in the application of knowledge—in this case, through community-building experiences—that it comes to life.

The Valhalla Wilderness Program, Slocan
(www2.sd8.bc.ca/schools/weg/default.htm)

W.E. Graham Community School in School District 8's Slocan Valley in the Kootenays

offers two “district choice programs” that focus on health and physical fitness while utilizing the outdoor area around the school to promote practical application of the skills and concepts taught. Over the last few years, the school has developed the Outdoor Environmental Leadership Program (OELP) for students in Grades 7 and 8, which is designed to complement the Valhalla Wilderness Program (VWP) for Grade 9 and 10 students, a program that has been in operation for more than a decade.

The OELP is a full-year, enriched educational program that offers students the opportunity to learn in many environments. In the mornings, students are involved in regular academic classes. In the afternoons, students participate in a combination of outdoor activities, physical education, applied skills (woodworking, textiles, home economics) and fine arts. The students also participate in six three- to five-day outdoor trips, each focusing on a specific outdoor activity, such as hiking and backpacking, canoeing, cycle touring, rock climbing, cross-country skiing, alpine skiing, mountain biking and essential outdoor skills. The OELP enables students to meet curricular outcomes while allowing them to apply the concepts in a variety of environments. By the end of the year, OELP students have completed all necessary Grade 7 or 8 courses, plus outdoor education.

The VWP describes itself as “a self-propelled wilderness experience that offers a high level of personal challenge.” It is a full-year eight-credit program during which, like TREK, students spend about 40 percent of their time

outdoors and 60 percent in the classroom, with a portion of the academic curriculum integrated with wilderness studies and outdoor living skills. Science, math, English and social studies are taught primarily in the mornings, and students participate in weekly day trips plus six week-long out-trips involving hiking, backcountry skiing/snowboarding and winter camping, mountain biking and canoeing.

During the course of the year, students take their St. John’s Ambulance Level One First Aid and CPR-C course in addition to the Avalanche Skills Level One course to enable them to participate more safely in backcountry activities (a big part of living in the Kootenays!). The program introduces technical skills, safety and decision-making strategies and

knowledge of the natural world to provide an entry for students interested in a career in the field of wilderness/adventure tourism management and outdoor recreation.



VWP was designed to be challenging, both physically and interpersonally. The record shows that VWP students, as with most, if not all, graduates of integrated curriculum programs, I’m guessing, go on to high levels of achievement academically, with increased self-confidence and a heightened sense of their place in the world. Indeed, each of these programs epitomizes the transformative power of outdoor education and experiential learning!

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