

Curriculum Integration in Ontario High Schools

By James Grice

At the outset of my undergraduate thesis, a friend challenged me to explain my reasons for choosing “integrated curricula” as my topic of interest. “OK,” he said as I finished explaining, “but what’s *really* in it for you?” The question took me aback. What, indeed, makes the pursuit of curriculum integration worthwhile? After 18 months of reflection and refinement, my response, I think, boils down to this: Work, when personalized and truly enjoyed, seems not like work at all. The same holds true in schools throughout North America. When we tailor a student’s *education* to his/her specific student needs, root it in reality and make it engaging for students and teachers alike, education is not something passively received—something tedious or boring—but an entity that is grasped. It is personal and it is real. And this is possible, I think, through curriculum integration.

In many North American schools, the acquirement of knowledge is encouraged in the most fractious of ways. At the high-school level, knowledge is often channelled into separate, specialized units of study. Rarely is an effort made to develop cross-subject, unifying themes that can help students recognize important points of curricular overlap. Worse still, the knowledge that we so aptly compartmentalize is frequently *inert* in nature—the kind that students learn only to regurgitate at the unit’s end. Strange as it may sound, students today are expected (and encouraged!) to *memorize*—not connect—the many and varied dots placed before them.

In his book entitled *Shop Class for Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford suggests that if thinking truly is bound up with action, then the task of getting an adequate grasp of the world, intellectually, depends on our doing stuff in it (p. 164). And in fact this is the case: “to really know shoelaces, you have to tie shoes” (p. 164). Students need to be shown that what they learn *inside* the classroom is relevant to the world around them. They need to see that their efforts can influence

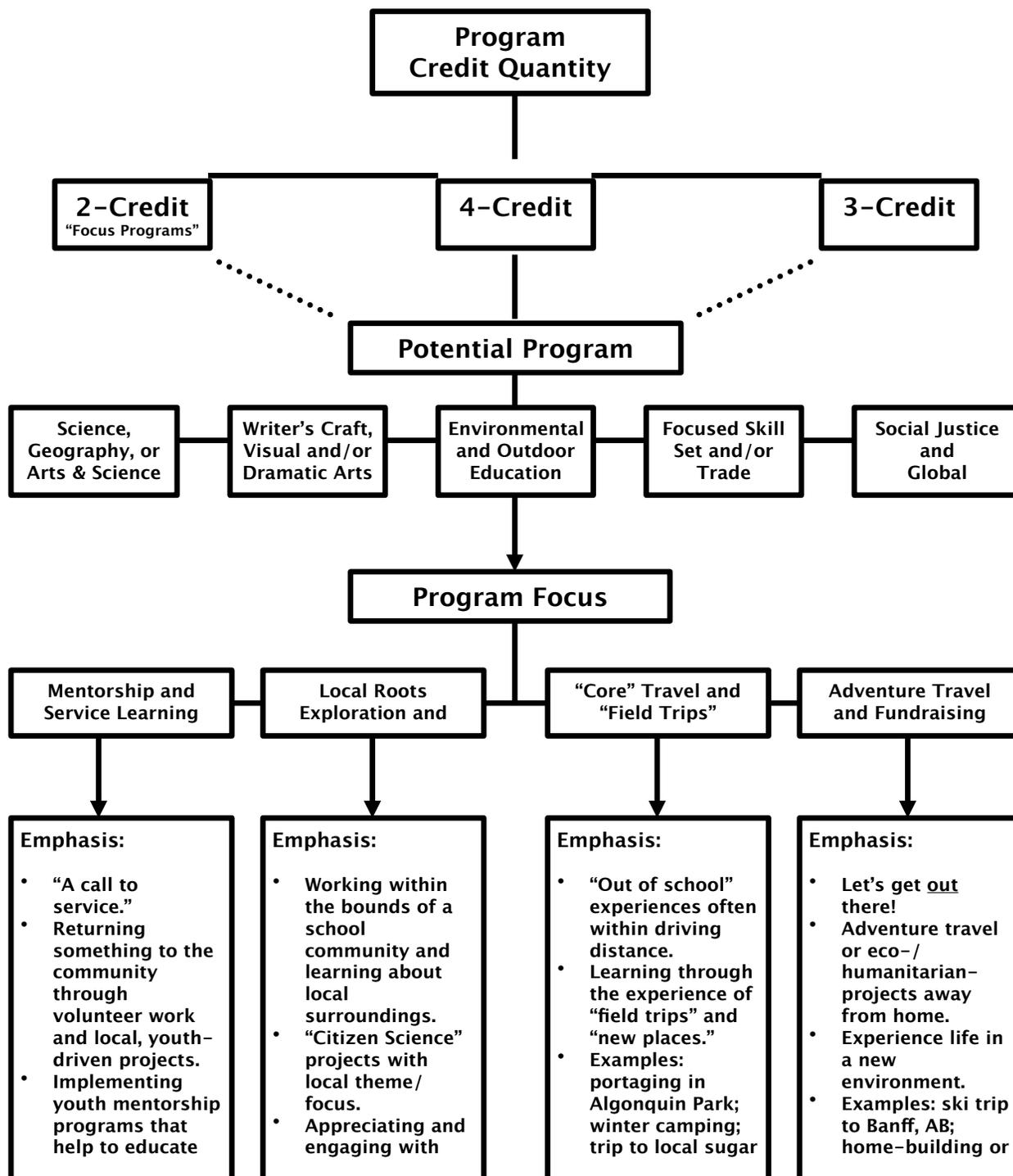
community decision making and lead to real solutions and real improvements. Most of all, they need to be encouraged to think *divergently*—to see many possible answers through a sometimes unlimited variety of lenses. Reality is integrated, and so too must learning be.

In Canada, and particularly in Ontario, a growing number of educators have embraced an approach to learning that employs “real-life” contexts as platforms for exploring “traditional” classroom work in more meaningful ways. The “integrated model” operates in a healthy number of Ontario high schools, and takes the form of *integrated curriculum programs* (ICPs)—programs that blend knowledge and skills from “conventional subjects” with learning opportunities that are experiential and interdisciplinary in nature. ICPs are essentially packages of two to four classes that students can take during one semester of high school. They have an integrating theme (e.g., environmental leadership, global citizenship, Catholic leadership or some kind of trade) that unifies the program’s courses. They also maintain a program focus (or combination of focuses) that might include service learning, community initiatives and local issues or some kind of travel component. The flow chart on page 5 is a condensed, visual representation of what ICPs look like in Ontario today.

Unlike those of a conventional high-school timetable, ICP courses are taught by the same teacher (or in some cases, two teachers) each and every day. But successful integration requires a lot more than throwing together curricular expectations from individual courses and expecting magic to occur.

Renowned Ontario researcher Bert Horwood (1994) suggests that *real* integration happens “not so much from putting school subjects together into a shared time and place, but from certain types of general experiences which transcend disciplines” (p. 91). Susan Drake 2000 adds that curricula can be

Integrated Curriculum Programs (ICPs) in Ontario— 2010–2011



completely integrated in content and still leave learners disinterested when delivered lifelessly. What truly “makes or breaks” an attempt at curriculum integration is not ultimately *what* is taught, but *how* it is taught (Drake, 2000). Successful ICPs provide students with a genuine sense of ownership and pride because students are prompted to make connections between classroom content and the world around them. They offer *real* challenges that make students better problem solvers, stronger critical thinkers and more adept at identifying links between the real and the abstract.

Exciting things are taking place at more than 150 Ontario ICPs, with many more programs yet to be identified and documented. In 2009–2010, Stan Kozak and the *Gosling Foundation* administered a survey of Ontario ICPs that yielded a bevy of important data and trends that educators and administrators will surely find interesting. Of the 50 programs that responded, for instance, an incredible 72 percent indicated a program start-date of 2000 or later, which signals a decade of strong program growth that we can feel optimistic (though not complacent) about.

At present, the majority of Ontario ICPs are geared toward Grade 11 and Grade 12 students, though an increasing number of schools are beginning to offer Grade 9 and 10 programs. Four-credit programs, particularly those rooted in *environmental leadership and/or outdoor education*, continue to be the most

prevalent across the province. They remain the “tested and true” ICP model in Ontario, although two-credit programs (dubbed “focus programs”) have become increasingly popular in urban centres throughout Ontario. Shown below is a visual representation of ICP credit allocation in Ontario’s high schools, based on data collected in Kozak’s survey.

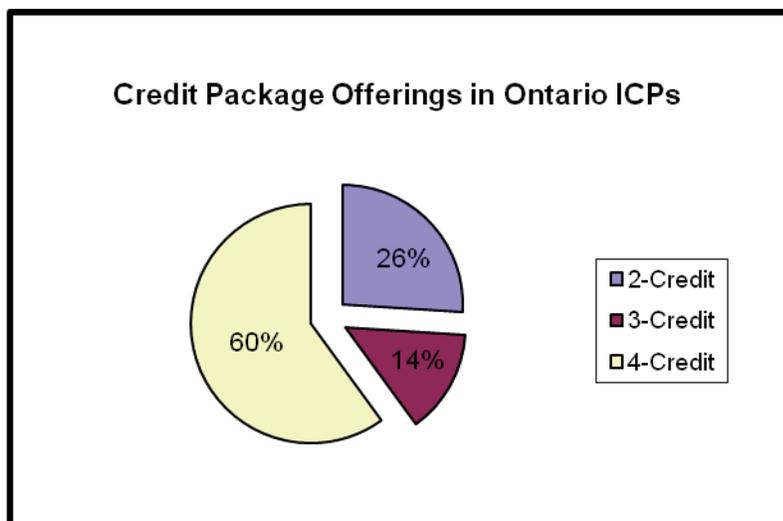
In the last ten years, methods of Ontario ICP implementation have changed dramatically. Teachers today who are interested in developing an ICP must choose one of three options for program design and implementation:

1. straight credit combination/integration
2. adopting an *Interdisciplinary Studies* curricular focus
3. tapping into the Ministry of Education’s *Specialist High Skills Major* initiative

The first method is the most basic in scope. It involves straight combination/integration of two to four courses by connecting them with a program theme like environmental leadership, journalism, biotechnology, social justice or global citizenship. Susan Hubner, lead teacher of John F. Ross CVI’s *da Vinci Arts & Science Environmental Leadership* program, uses “arts and science” as her program’s integrating theme. The four-credit *da Vinci* program offers English (ENG 3U), Biology (SBI 3U), Visual Arts (AVI 3M) and Anthropology/Sociology/Psychology (HSP

3M), and is open to all Grade 11 students in the Upper Grand District School Board who are keen to explore the environment through a unique combination of the arts and sciences.

The second method of ICP implementation involves a 2002 Ministry curriculum document entitled *Interdisciplinary Studies*. *Interdisciplinary Studies* was introduced as part



of Ontario’s Grades 11 and 12 curricula in response to the “unprecedented range of social, scientific, economic, cultural, environmental, political, and technological issues” that students are faced with (Interdisciplinary Studies 3). At the time, the Government of Ontario proposed the coupling of discrete, knowledge-based skills with “interdisciplinary skills” that are closely related to research work, information management, group collaboration, critical and creative thinking and technological applications (p. 4). As part of the interdisciplinary studies curriculum, students apply the concepts, methods and language of more than one discipline to explore topics, develop skills and solve problems (p. 5). Courses in interdisciplinary studies packages are meant to be explored in a way that reflects the linkages and interdependencies among subjects, disciplines and the courses themselves (p. 5). Using this model, educators can build an ICP in accordance with Ministry guidelines, while also catering to students who have

diverse abilities, interests and learning styles. More information about the interdisciplinary studies curriculum can be found online at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/interdisciplinary1112curr.pdf.

The third and final way to build an ICP involves tapping into Ontario’s *Specialist High Skills Major* (SHSM) initiative—a relatively new, Ministry-approved opportunity that allows students to focus their learning on a specific economic sector while meeting the requirements for graduation. Students gain important skills on the job with employers, at skills training centres and at school. They also earn valuable industry certifications. Each “major” (shown below) is a bundle of eight to ten Grades 11 and 12 courses in the student’s selected field.

SHSM experiential learning and “career exploration” activities involve planned learning activities that take place outside of the traditional classroom setting and are

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| - Agriculture | - Forestry | - Manufacturing |
| - Arts and Culture | - Health and Wellness | - Mining |
| - Aviation/Aerospace | - Horticulture and Landscaping | - Non-profit |
| - Business | - Hospitality and Tourism | - Sports |
| - Construction | - Info./Comm. Technology | - Transportation |
| - Energy | - Justice/Community/Safety & | |
| - Environment Justice | Emergency Services | |

All SHSMs include the following five mandatory program components:

- 1. a bundle of eight to ten Grade 11 and Grade 12 credits including**
 - i. four “major” credits that provide sector-specific knowledge and skills
 - ii. two to four other required credits
 - iii. two co-operative education credits
- 2. sector-recognized certifications and/or training courses and programs**
- 3. experiential learning and career exploration activities within the sector**
- 4. “reach ahead” experiences connected to the student’s post-secondary pathway**

related to the sector of the SHSM. To a large extent, they represent the type of learning experience that has long been a flagship component of Ontario ICPs. Career-related experiences might include job shadowing, job twinning, worksite tours or attendance at career conferences and competitions—all of which allow students to explore careers in a specific sector and reflect on the activity afterwards (often through a discussion or an assignment). “Reach-ahead” experiences, which allow students to experience the “next step” in their chosen post-secondary pathway (college, university, workplace, etc.), take place outside the classroom and can vary in length.

Most of the experiential and training components of SHSMs depend on the local circumstances of the school and school community (e.g., facilities and equipment, staff qualifications, partnerships and agreements). Careful consideration of all of these elements will help to determine how an SHSM’s required components can be effectively delivered to students. Depending on circumstances, some components can be delivered in a secondary school, college, training centre, other approved site or a combination of settings.

SHSMs are currently funded by the Government of Ontario through various existing sources (like *Student Success*) and other types of foundation funding (such as GSN—“grants for student needs”). As of 2010–2011, at least one major is offered in every Ontario school board. This is positive news for ICPs, which have plenty to gain by “tapping into” successful SHSMs. An existing four-credit ICP, for example, could consider offering its credits as part of an SHSM. Students would complete a selection of SHSM components by completing one semester in the ICP. The remaining SHSM components would be administered or “covered” by other SHSM teachers in the school. As of 2009–2010, roughly 35 percent of Kozak’s ICP respondents indicated that they operate under the umbrella of their school or board’s SHSM(s). This arrangement provides ICPs with greater stability and a more prominent identity within their local

school and board, and increases the always-important possibility of additional program funding.

In conclusion, regardless of *how* an ICP is designed and / or implemented, it’s worth noting that the most successful programs are the ones that strike a healthy balance of support between teachers, students, parents, administrators, community members and, in some cases, the Ministry of Education.

With three possible gateways that can lead to the development of an ICP, Ontario educators have more opportunity than ever to capture the “magic” of integrated curricula and establish a program of their own.

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