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**‘Lift off!’: Employing an integrated curriculum design to increase student, faculty, and community engagement**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to appraise the value of employing an Integrated Curriculum Design (ICD) in a Tourism Program. Drawing on data collected from undergraduate students, course instructors, and teaching assistants, we outline opportunities and challenges that may accompany ICDs, as well as offer recommendations for educators who may wish to use an ICD. Analysis revealed that integration across courses fosters deep learning through peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, community engagement, and real world application. Such insights indicate that ICDs support students in becoming better collaborators and empower them to make a difference in the classroom, their communities, and society.

**Key words:** pedagogy, integrated curriculum design, deep learning, student engagement, collaboration.

## **1. Introduction**

On May 25, 2016, Donovan Livingston stood before peers, professors, friends, and family to address the graduating class of Harvard University's Graduate School. Diverging from a traditionally structured graduation speech, Donovan performed spoken-word to deliver his message. Poetically pleading, he implored, "...as educators, rather than raising your voices over the rustling of our chains, take them off. Un-cuff us" (Livingston, 2016). Donovan's remarks were powerful, and memorable not only because of what he said but, how he said it. His words challenged epistemological foundations of higher education, calling into question the ways we understand teaching and learning in contemporary society. "Lift off! No, the sky is not the limit. It is only the beginning" (Livingston, 2016).

The metaphorical shackles and educational imprisonment described in Livingston's (2016) speech reverberate in critiques of traditional pedagogical approaches and call for increased innovation and educational reform. Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970) has long questioned the traditional dynamics between students, their teachers, and society. More recently, tourism and leisure pedagogues have expressed similar criticisms (Baldwin, Mainieri, & Brookover, 2013; Belhassen & Caton, 2011; Boluk & Carnicelli, 2019; Carnicelli & Boluk, 2017; Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Paddison & Mortimer, 2016). Baldwin et al. (2013), faculty of a Recreation and Tourism Management Department, contend that the rigid structure of traditional classrooms "can become like a prison to innovation and a refuge for silos" (p. 65), which smothers students' passion, excitement, and desire to engage. Here, the distinct and separate classes and time slots, courses taught by different instructors who often do not communicate with each other, and a reliance on lecture-based formats, characterize "traditional" education delivery.

Traditional educational structures mimic those of factory labor (similar to the Industrial Revolution), where the teaching models in contemporary Western universities mutually condition and discipline students to become compliant workers, rather than critical and creative thinkers. Often sold to student-consumers as a form of "skills training", tourism education is increasingly critiqued for reflecting neoliberal capitalist relations of production and consumption, having adverse effects on individual self-determination and collective democracy (Belhassen & Caton, 2011; Boluk & Carnicelli, 2019). Such educational transactions embolden academic

specialization and an adherence to “silo” or “disciplinary” approaches instead of integrated, holistic and critical learning, thereby rousing student frustration around the applicability and relevance of material (Barnett, 1994; Belhassen & Caton, 2011; Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Paisley, Spencer, Wells, & Schwab, 2013).

The lack of interdisciplinary and critical teaching has raised valid concerns for tourism educators. Undeniably, the types of jobs

that students will encounter in modern workplaces cut across disciplines, asking students to engage and solve complex problems (Paddison & Mortimer, 2016). Anderson (2013) ironically points out that faculty often have limited experience working outside of academia; consequently, there remain “too many gaps between practice and teaching as a result of a lack of interaction between faculty and the business that they are preparing their students to enter” (p. 5). Therefore, there has been increasing support for the need to develop curricula that assimilates business/community environments (Fenton & Gallant; Stergiou, Airey, & Riley, 2008) and “authentic learning” contexts (Paddison & Mortimer, 2016; Zahra, 2012). Critical of too much emphasis on vocational preparation, however, Tribe (2000; 2001; 2008) suggests that a liberal component must also be maintained, and that students should have opportunities to reflect about their own profession as future managers in the tourism industry.

We argue an Integrated Curriculum Design (ICD) might be one revolutionary act toward reimagining the structures of traditional education, providing students with both immersive interdisciplinary-learning contexts and opportunities for reflection. Some research has posited integrated curriculum as a way to enhance student participation, foster dialogue among faculty members, improve the relevancy of material, and engage with community stakeholders (Athavale, Davis, & Myring, 2008; Boluk, Muldoon, & Johnson, 2019a, 2019b; Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Powell, James, & Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, an ICD may unite core degree courses, and supports deep learning opportunities among students, simultaneously leading students to be better collaborators and empowering them to make a difference in the classroom, their community, and society.

Though many university faculties are beginning to understand the appeal of an integrated

curriculum approach (Anderson, 2013), the implementation of such interdisciplinary programming, specifically within tourism programs, is relatively limited and comes with its challenges. Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to appraise the value of integrated curriculum in higher education. In particular, we analyze an ICD that was employed across two core-curriculum courses in a Canadian University Tourism Program. Drawing on empirical data collected from two cohorts of undergraduate students and interviews with the teaching team (course instructors and teaching assistants), we outline the opportunities and challenges that can accompany ICDs, as well as offer recommendations for educators who may wish to use an ICD within their own classrooms.

Like Powell, Johnson, James, and Dunlap (2013), we too recognize that “most of us, are not fortunate enough to find [a] safe space to ‘play with pedagogy’” (p. viii). Moreover, we believe that emerging scholars are not supported with resources to conduct pedagogical research. With this in mind, the second objective of this paper is to extend hope – to capture “the imagination of the young instructor or the seasoned pedagogue about what might be possible” (Powell, James, et al., 2013, p. ix). Echoing the sentiments of disruption projected in Donovan Livingston's (2016) spoken-word performance at Harvard's convocation, we urge: reenvision the limits of your programs and curriculum – “Lift Off!” To set the context for this appeal, we first provide a brief review of integrated learning before describing our data collection.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Integrated learning in higher education*

Integration within education stresses the interdisciplinary nature of teaching and learning. Integrated learning can be understood as an umbrella concept for a range of strategies and approaches to learning that span across disciplinary, cohort, and institutional boundaries (Klein, 2005). Such approaches are necessary to prepare students for the world beyond the walls of university classrooms. To Shoemaker (1989) integrated learning is,

Education that is organized in such a way that it cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study. It views learning and teaching in a holistic way and reflects the real world, which is interactive. (p. 5)

Closely related to experiential education, Fenton and Gallant (2016) indicate that integrated curricula – what they refer to as “integrated experiential education” – includes “the practice of facilitating experiential opportunities for students, but in a coordinated and interdisciplinary way that involves multiple courses, multiple faculty members, and the surrounding community” (p. 2). Markus, Howard, and King (1993) contend that first-hand immersive experiences are paramount to students’ learning, whereby they benefit from spending time working and learning in contexts where they can apply theory and increase their awareness around social issues. Research also suggests that students work better in teams, and feel more capable of applying knowledge as they learn classroom material most relevant to their community experiences (Anderson, 2013; Athavale et al., 2008; Brunel & Hibbard, 2006). These types of learning experiences foster interpersonal skills, increase classroom engagement and intellectual curiosity, and enhance overall academic performance and problem solving skills (Austin, Hirstein, & Walen, 1997). Correspondingly, students have more positive perceptions of course instruction, content, and structure (Austin et al., 1997; Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Paisley et al., 2013).

Moreover, integration into the community can shift traditional teaching and learning relationships, where students work with industry representatives and community organizations, and course instructors become members of a “learning community”, teaching and learning with students (Anderson, 2013). In this way, instructors of an ICD reflect Freire’s (1970) notion of the “revolutionary educator”, whereby they “resolve the teacher-student contradiction”, exchanging “the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students” (p. 75). Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) suggest that these mutual positions of teaching and learning can foster greater levels of engagement, action, and respect from educators and students, ultimately empowering students.

Despite the aforementioned benefits, “buy-in” for integrated programming remains low among university faculties and departments (Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Powell, James, et al., 2013). In part, this is due to the limited theoretical and empirical research around integrated curriculum. Furthermore, the process of implementing such interdisciplinary programming comes with its challenges, deterring institutional investment and commitment. For instance, moving away from

didactic and traditional teaching techniques requires a level of “retraining” and professional development for faculty members, while additional time and energy is necessary to develop and maintain connections with community organizations (Anderson, 2013; Breunig, 2014; Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Katz, 2013). This has a compounding effect on the already existing pressures faced by many scholars, who are trying to achieve excellence not only in teaching, but in research and service as well (Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Katz, 2013).

Much of the past research on integrated curriculum has concentrated on primary and secondary levels of education rather than within higher education (Austin et al., 1997). University business schools became some of the early adopters of integrated education as their departments began to recognize that the fragmentation of learning is no longer reflective of today's business environment (Walker & Black, 2000). Athavale et al. (2008) point out that integrated curriculum, designed well, emphasizes the interrelationships between the various functioning areas of a business, and thus prepares graduates with more comprehensive understandings of organizational interactions.

Tourism scholars have given considerable attention to authenticating learning environments, grounding business education and research in practice in order to engage with the tacit knowledge required by the sector (Albrecht, 2012; Paddison & Mortimer, 2016; Stregiou et al., 2008; Zahra, 2012); however, tourism research specifically related to the concept “integrated curriculum” is still quite limited. Notable exceptions include works like Bynum’s (2011) who argues for the integration of sustainability into tourism and hospitality curriculum. Here, sustainability is positioned as the ultimate context for undergraduate student learning. Boluk et al. (2019a) explore the co-creation of an ICD in their tourism program, with a specific interest in the relationships cultivated with local tourism enterprises and achieving mutually desirable benefits for all involved. The authors point out the often-disproportionate balance between the outcomes generated for community partners and the learning outcomes for students. However, the co-creation of the ICD seemed to engender desirable benefits for both stakeholders. Lastly, Boluk, Muldoon, and Johnson (2019b) draw attention to the opportunities for faculty members at diverse career stages involved in the development of an ICD as a way for them to each reflect on their own pedagogical values, questions, and learnings.



Vital to integrating curriculum are strategic methods for successfully creating interdisciplinary-based learning opportunities for students. Methods may include problem-based models, thematic learning, and backward design, all of which highlight specific problems, themes, and/or “big ideas” that become the focus of an interdisciplinary course/curriculum. Such pedagogical approach typically requires knowledge from various subjects to engage learning experiences and solve problems (Leopp, 1999; Wiggins & McTighi, 2001). Despite this common vision, however, integrated learning within higher education is sometimes broadly defined and can include varying points of integration. We briefly turn to this discussion next to help illustrate the design of our own integrated curriculum.

## *2.2. Locating points of integration in tourism curriculum*

Abandoning static models of delivery (e.g., one course, one teacher, one classroom), an ICD embraces more collaborative and organic teaching methods, grounded in the needs of the learners and the communities where learning takes place. According to Fenton and Gallant (2016), community-based settings are powerful contexts for integration because these real-life settings are inherently interdisciplinary. Student teaching, service-learning, volunteerism, and internships are examples of integration with the community, each encompassing various ways students can engage in their field of practice. Swap and Wayland (2013) identify these experiences as “intellectual apprenticeships,” which bolster student appreciation for processes rather than outcomes. Integrated curriculum may also be organized as blocks of courses taught by a team of teachers, who emphasize the interrelationships between courses or disciplines. Alternatively, programs can be set up as living-learning communities whereby students live together based on a theme (e.g., the environment, social justice, fine arts, etc.) or common academic major (cf. Dunn & Dean, 2013).

While points of integration are increasing within postsecondary education through various pedagogical techniques, researchers continue to establish models, continuums, and frameworks to help further define and contextualize integrated curriculum (cf. Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Powell, 2013). The ICD we implemented in the winter term of 2016, reflected several of the points indicated on Powell’s (2013) Continuum of Collaboration within a Faculty Discipline

such as: cross-linking assignments; blending individual courses; and unifying a cohort with a teaching team. According to Powell (2013) blended courses and cross-linked assignments allow for different cohorts of students to pursue the same content, but at different depths.

Correspondingly, we blended two courses in the Tourism Program at the University of Waterloo: a 1st year Introduction to Tourism course comprised of 350 students and a 4th year Advanced Seminar in Tourism, Well-being, and Community of 22 students. In the past, both courses were scheduled as individual, standalone courses; however, they are now framed by an ICD and share a common capstone project called Ontario Attractions, Wonders, and Experiences (AWE). AWE was designed as a five-phase project with multiple points of intersection between the two student cohorts.

The phases included:

1. 1st and 4th year students came together for a guest lecture by a representative from a destination marketing organization (RTO4) from the Kitchener-Waterloo region.
2. With insights from RTO4's presentation, the 4th year students generated a list of tourism attractions in the region to pass along to the 1st year students, who then selected one to visit and evaluate.
3. 1st year students conducted site visits and evaluated their visitor experience and satisfaction pre, during, and post visit, recording insights to pass along to the 4th year students for analysis. Students assumed roles of expert users (1st year students) and designers (4th year students).
4. The two cohorts were then brought together virtually, through online discussion boards, to allow the 4th year students to probe 1st year students further around their experiences, as well as brainstorm initial ideas for potential recommendations.
5. The final phase of AWE culminated in formal presentations delivered by the 4th year students to the 1st year students and a panel of tourism industry and community stakeholders.

Fenton and Gallant (2016) contend that spending time in the surrounding community is essential to integrated education. These immersive environments create conditions for the formation of new relationships among students, instructors, and community partners: a conversation we return

to later.

### **3. Methodology**

This study is a part of a larger project supported by an internal grant received from the Center for Teaching Excellence. As stated at the outset, the aim of our research was to appraise the integration of two core courses within a Tourism Program. As such, we undertook a qualitative, interpretive inquiry to examine students, teaching assistants, and course instructors' experiences and responses to our ICD (as described above). Interpretivist studies assume that people create their own subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (Schwandt, 2007). This methodological approach aligned well with our intention to increase knowledge and understandings around the value of employing an ICD. Our researcher positionalities played key roles as we explored the idiosyncrasies of the curriculum, and highlighted the socially constructed reality of the various research participants (Schwandt, 2007). Karla (course instructor) and Maggie (Lead TA) were the primary course facilitators of the ICD throughout the semester, while Corey introduced ICD to the department, served as a mentor during the implementation of it, and led the interviews.

Data for this research was collected between January and June of 2016 from undergraduate students, course instructors, and teaching assistants. Insights from students were predominantly derived from reflection papers collected throughout the term. Following each point of integration, students were asked to reflect on their ICD experiences considering some of the following: a contribution they made; key learnings from the community; the role of their voice and opinions; and what, if any, suggestions they had for improving the ICD. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the teaching team after the term concluded. Corey conducted interviews with the five teaching assistants, Karla (course instructor), and Maggie (Lead TA). All research participants were purposefully sought out as each of them maintained an active role in assisting with the implementation and delivery of the ICD, as well as contributed to the marking and evaluation of students' participation and engagement. Each interview was approximately 60-80 min in length, audio-recorded and transcribed. Questions that guided these conversations included (but were not limited to): What similarities/differences did the ICD course have to other classes that you taught or served as a teaching assistant for?; What were

some of the advantages and disadvantages of grounding assignments within the community/industry?; What were some of the challenges or pitfalls in the implementation of the ICD?; and What were the students' reactions to the integrated process and assignments?

To analyze the data, we employed inductive thematic analysis techniques to identify connections, themes, and recurring patterns that cut through the data (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2002). An inductive approach allowed the data to dictate initial codes emerging from the student reflection papers and interview transcripts, rather than pre-established a priori codes or themes. After establishing initial codes (e.g., empowerment, knowledge sharing, openness, importance of communication, etc.), we also searched for commonalities and contradictions among the participants, seeking patterns associated with the role that they played in the delivery and implementation of the ICD. Meanings emerged from the resulting connections, as well as from our own subjective interactions with, and interpretations of the data, which helped to form final two overarching themes.

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

In this section of the paper, we contextualize the two overarching themes that emerged from our analysis of the ICDs: (1) Engaging Deep Learning, and (2) Nurturing Growing Pains. “Deep learning” represents various codes and categories derived from data associated with the benefits of implementing an ICD: empowerment, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, community engagement, and real world applicability. However, analysis also revealed student resistance and confusion, as well as moments of miscommunication during the delivery of the new curriculum. These insights are captured within “growing pains” theme, and can be used as valuable moments to question and reflect on how to improve. In what follows, we draw excerpts from our primary data and insights from the literature to further unpack both themes. We incorporate throughout recommendations and messages of cautions for educators interested in implementing an ICD.

##### *4.1. Engaging deep learning*

Integrated curriculum can facilitate opportunities for deep learning. Here, we understand deep learning to mean that students equally feel challenged, engaged, and increasingly motivated as they trust their own capabilities. Students realize their ability to drive their learning and draw

connections in one class and apply it to another. They are capable of determining how their course work relates to the real world, becoming more critical and creative problem-solvers, ultimately participating more effectively and collaboratively in various teams.

According to previous research deep learning may improve students' attitudes toward classroom engagement (Austin et al., 1997; Powell, James, et al., 2013). Referring to our ICD capstone project (AWE), one of the 4th year students indicated: "I enjoyed the integrated curriculum design, as I believe that it is an assignment that can help me in the workplace and isn't just one of those pointless university assignments that you rush to complete." This student recognized the applicability and value in evaluating real-life and local tourism attractions in the community, creating excitement, purpose, and a point of engagement. Similarly, another student explained how her experience interacting with the community impacted her level of interest in the course:

Communicating with the representatives from the different tourist attractions was a valuable experience for us, as it has introduced many of us to the Waterloo tourism community. I thought it was great that we were doing an assignment that had real implications in this tourism industry, it made me feel much more interested and engaged than I usually am with other assignments. Our data provided evidence that ICD provides opportunities beyond just learning but adding moments for exploration, fun, and critical thinking outside of the classroom.

As noted in the data, students are not always enthusiastic about assignments, nor engaged; likely a reflection of the perils of traditional education (Carnicelli & Boluk, 2017; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). The course instructor recalled the motivation behind the ICD project: "The impetus was to get the students out of the classroom and visit one tourism attraction within the community". These direct community visits, and our interdisciplinary approach exposed students to new and innovative pedagogical practices. A 1st year student admitted, "This was my first experience with an integrated curriculum, and I found that I was able to learn and take much more information away from the course. Being able to interact and critically address problems, while working with the 4th year students opened up an opportunity for learning that I wouldn't have been exposed to otherwise." Reflecting aspects of curriculum models devised by Fenton and Gallant (2016) and Powell (2013), our conscious alignment of multiple subjects, the immersive community experiences, and the relational roles between 1st and 4th year students, educators,

and industry that permitted students to experience deep learning.

#### 4.1.1. Empowerment & student-led learning

Student empowerment is implicated in experiences of deep learning. As students take control of their learning, they feel confident, which can lead to their own revolutionary suggestions and ideas (Powell, James, et al., 2013). This was evidenced when the 4th year student groups presented their tourism solutions to the industry representatives and the 1st year students. One 4th year student opined, “I felt like a working professional who was hired to evaluate the attraction and implement new ideas”. The teaching team acknowledged how students' perceptions of this responsibility – being professional consultants – motivated them to take more care towards assignments, bolstering their sense of accomplishment. Maggie explained, “When the 4th year students heard the industry professionals' responses to their solutions, they were super jazzed, like ‘wow we're being recognized for our good ideas.’” Similarly, the Karla emphasized, “our 4th year students felt as though their voices were heard! It was neat to see the industry was asking for contact details from some of our expert designers, and they were able to engage in a dialogue subsequent to the presentations”.

The 1st year students felt comparable feelings of empowerment as their own ideas contributed to the tourism solutions presented. One student explained, “I liked how the presentations really integrated our suggestions, it was cool to see how our ideas could be expanded into a realistic option.” The empowerment felt, particularly by the 4th year students, supports Tribe's (2000; 2001; 2008) point that students should be granted the opportunity to reflect on their future professional roles in the industry. Indeed, the student reflections reveal a sense of value and recognition for their ideas. Such feelings highlight how the ICD breaks away from the traditional, rigid roles of teacher and student (Freire, 1970), and contrasts negative perceptions of applicability and relevancy of classroom material as discussed in the literature (cf. Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Paisley et al., 2013).

Moreover, when implemented effectively, integrated education may empower and increase student-led learning within the classroom. However, we contend that these moments of empowerment arise for students when choice is present and instructor control is minimized.

From Maggie's perspective, then AWE project did just that: “The ICD gave students more control in the course, especially from the 4th year perspective [...] they were able to ask the questions, and come up with interventions. It gave them a bit more control and empowered them to take initiative.” Differing from a traditional classroom, ICD can assist in shifting power dynamics. This decentering of the teaching team's authority encourages students to initiate the type of learning they want to experience. One of the teaching assistants recalled:

[The 1st year students] could do as little or as much as they wanted [...] it was very much up to them. The ICD project gave them a lot of power and choice, in the sense of how engaged they desired to become. Some students sought out the CEO and took initiative to call the staff [of their given attraction], while others just went to the museum for an hour.

Consistent with Fenton and Gallant (2016) and Swap and Wayland (2013), our ICD approach encouraged an appreciation for a learning process rather than mastery of content. As educators move from didactic to constructivist methods, students are empowered and motivated to be active participants in the classroom and beyond (Fenton & Gallant, 2016) further decentering the neoliberal emphasis that is seen in many tourism programs (Belhassen & Caton, 2011; Boluk & Carnicelli, 2019).

#### 4.1.2. Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing

ICD also encourages peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, whereby students think together, exchange ideas, and work collaboratively. Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing contributes to deep learning by encouraging teamwork and a cooperative style of learning (Brunel & Hibbard, 2006). One of the 1st year students reflected on the value of the online integrated discussion boards: “The [online] communication with the 4th year students provided a great platform for us to share and collaborate on ideas.” Likewise, a 4th year student noted:

I found that the integrated discussion boards were very empowering and made learning different concepts covered in the literature a little more interesting. Rather than one person providing information and their opinions on a given topic, the discussions allowed us to hear from a variety of different viewpoints and made class a lot more engaging.

Instead of only learning from lectures or receiving assignment feedback, students also interacted with their peers in and across the two courses. These various points of intersection produced new and interesting insights, and fostered a more reciprocal course dialogue, likely not occurring in

top-down teaching models.

At times, these moments of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing were democratizing as students began to experience education as something they do rather than as something done to them (Freire, 1970). After seeing the 4th year students confidently present their tourism solutions to industry stakeholders, this 1st year student felt assured that others will listen to her, and was encouraged to share her own ideas in the future: “I learned that the sky's the limit, be as creative as you can while being realistic. If you have valuable suggestions, people will listen”. Another 1st year student saw his own ideas incorporated into the 4th year students' final tourism solutions. He exclaimed, “I feel like our [1st year student] concerns were heard by the 4th year students!” Such insights provide evidence that the ICD granted opportunities to foster dialogue and enhanced student participation (cf. Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Powell, James, et al., 2013).

According to Shor (1992), dialogue is democratic. It is a mutually created discourse “which questions existing canons of knowledge and challenges power relations in the classroom and in society” (Shor, 1992, p.87). As such dialogue creates a space of shared authority. In our ICD, opportunities for dialogue increased through the integrative discussion board, which contributed peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and the shifting of power dynamics within our classroom. Maggie explained “the ICD encouraged 1st year students to communicate with other learners, who also felt novice around particular course content. They could ask their questions that they perceived to be ‘dumb’ as the student-led discussion boards provided a safer space.”

Undeniably, most professors and instructors are likely open to hearing from students in their classrooms. Yet, the traditional structures of lecture-based teaching often keep students at a distance, contributing to their perceptions of safety and inclusiveness (or lack thereof) in the classroom. Therefore, ICD and opportunities for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing are integral in creating more reciprocal and democratic environments and relationships.

#### 4.1.3. Community engagement & ‘real’ world application

Immersion into the community provides powerful contexts for deep learning. These real-world settings are inherently interdisciplinary, and mirror complex work environments students will



one day engage (Fenton & Gallant, 2016). Throughout the term, our students interacted with the various intersecting sectors (e.g., transportation, food & beverage, attraction, etc.) of the tourism industry. One teaching assistant commented that these immersive experiences “let students approach things in a more active and practical way,” which is very applicable and “useful to them, especially as they move out of the university setting.” A 4th year student explained, “Students were encouraged to go outside of their comfort zone and contact members of the community, industry professionals, and clients. Most students are not provided with this opportunity, which is important when dealing with the real, business world.” This is important given Anderson’s (2013) point that often times faculty have limited experience working outside of academia.

As such, integrated curriculum can encourage and motivate students to seek alternative ways of knowing, and provide opportunities for students to fill the knowledge gap. Indeed, ICD changes the contexts of learning, contributing to a more authentic learning environment – one that is grounded in practice and resembles the complexity of the real-life application of knowledge (Paddison & Mortimer, 2016). At the same time, industry leaders and community members can be fundamental co-educators, narrowing the gap between practice and theoretical teachings.

Though industry professionals can assume roles of co-educators, their participation in ICD can also resemble that of co-learners, where they share the responsibilities of teaching and learning with students. The course instructor explained, “Our community representatives had recognized that a number of attractions were having difficulty tracking the user experience and they wanted to figure out how to improve that [...] so they approached us and said ‘we have this problem, how can your students help?’” These industry needs were built upon mutual interests, and reciprocity was generated between the community and students. For example, the student engagements with the attractions, and subsequently the proposed user experience solutions, became valuable to the community, and in turn contributed to students' sense of empowerment and achievement. Karla proclaimed, “The students were aware of some challenges the industry and attractions were facing, so I think the experiential component was important [...] it empowered the students and they were the experts.”

In the end, the industry panelists were responsive to the solutions for their attractions, as they subsequently implemented several of the ideas presented in the final presentations. The 4th years reflected on their experiences, highlighting how much they valued the industry's involvement. One student commented, “Their appreciation of our ideas and willingness to work with us made me feel like I really had something to offer to the ‘real world’.” Another student noted, “I thought it was really great to have industry professionals come to watch our final presentations. This really upped the ante and forced us to put forth a lot of effort into the assignment and our presentation.” Interestingly, although perhaps not unexpected, students' reflections revealed heightened accountability for their products when asked to present their ideas in front of our community partners.

Finally, as a result of their immersive community engagements, students gained practical insights, and enhanced their professional and critical-thinking skills (Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Klein, 2005). Students were much more aware of their own responsibilities as tourists too. “It is important for me to think about how I am going to impact the environment and culture of the attraction I am visiting [because] I don't want to leave a negative impact behind,” a 1st year student critically reflected. Here, it is evident that AWE provided our students with meaningful and relevant activities connecting their course material to real issues in the community. From these integrative moments arises space for tourism education to foster critical citizens (Boluk, Cavaliere, & Duffy, 2019) who may take risks and challenge their own personal actions, the actions of others, and drive positive outcomes for the larger community. As Tribe (2000) advises, curriculum should boast a balance between developing skills to satisfy the demands of businesses, and the knowledge required to operate within the wider tourism world, responsibility.

#### *4.2. Nurturing growing pains*

Though the implementation of our ICD saw great success, this was our department's first attempt at this type of curriculum reform, and the process was not without challenges. Issues included student resistance and the miscommunication of expectations, as well as structural and logistical difficulties experienced during the delivery of the curriculum. We argue that these challenges, are “growing pains” – reactions to, and effects of, something new and still being developed. That being said, Karla advised for others to harness patience when implementing ICD. She explicated,

“It's an iterative process. The initial model that we developed was tweaked throughout the semester, so you just have to bare in mind how the students are reacting and take it in, and change accordingly.” Indeed teaching is an iterative process. Courses are often repeated, affording additional time for “tweaks” and reflection: What can be done better or more effectively in our next ICD iteration? How might we nurture our curriculum's own growing pains? With these questions in mind, we revisit the challenges that we encountered during our delivery of our ICD, offering recommendations for remedy.

#### 4.2.1. Openness to relearning

A primary challenge inherent in employing ICD is that it represents a complete systematic reform, one that involves a process of relearning, or unlearning the way things are done in traditional classrooms (Boluk & Carnicelli, 2019; Boluk et al., 2019; Freire, 1970). One of the 4th year students said:

I really liked the unstructured way this course was set up, but I know that it also makes many students feel lost and uncomfortable. As this is a 4th year course, I feel that the lack of structure reflected the level of confidence that [our instructor] had in the students to independently manage their own responsibilities.

Although this particular student embraced her new educational experiences, drawing connections between her feelings and the probable intentions of the Karla's (the instructor) pedagogical approach, her additional comment about other students' confusion mirrors apprehension and resistance we also encountered. For instance, another 4th year student reflected, “Even while writing my critical intervention with my group now, I'm still unsure what we are doing and what is being asked of us.” Although student skepticism and resistance can be painful, it may “strengthen the process overall” (Powell, James, et al., 2013, p. 115). Student uncertainty towards our educational methods (i.e. student-led learning, less top-down instruction, flexible structure, etc.) gives voice to important questions. How may we better translate our intentions to our students? What underpins the resistance towards our innovative pedagogical practices?

As Powell, Johnson, et al. (2013) suggest “while innovators are usually anxious for a green light, others prefer the yellow hue of caution and seek a slower momentum toward innovation and its implementation” (p. 115). Thus, we recognize that some of the resistance we confronted comes

from this cautionary positioning, reflective of uncertainties that accompany the integral epistemological shift required by ICD. Such transition not only entails university and department buy-in (Paisley et al., 2013; Powell, James, et al., 2013), but also necessitates an openness and willingness to participate from students, the teaching team, and collaborating community members. Indeed experiential teaching, like an ICD, impels more concerted effort by both faculty and students (Fenton & Gallant, 2016). A teaching assistant (an Alumni of the undergraduate program) compared our current ICD to his previous experience of the stand-alone 1st year Introduction to Tourism course:

It was just lectures [...] and then you had four multiple choice quizzes, each of them worth 25% [...] I guess what I'm saying is it didn't take a lot of effort from me as a student when I was taking this course, and I can see that this time around [the 2016 ICD iteration], the students would have to delve a lot deeper.

Certainly, our shift from didactic to constructivist methods was intentional. Nevertheless, this movement can be experienced as uncomfortable and involves additional effort and work from those involved to prove effective. Accordingly, Fenton and Gallant (2016) point out, “students experience frustration with teaching environments that differ from other classes they are taking” (p.7). As such, the deployment of an ICD demands “openness,” and a relearning of how to open oneself to new ways of knowing and experiencing higher education. Yet, from our analysis, it quickly became apparent that vital to this openness are clear lines of communication and shared understandings of course expectations.

#### 4.2.2. Understanding & communicating expectations

The initial steps towards implementing an integrated curriculum can seem overwhelming. Pharr (2000) reminds us that we are not alone; a team of faculty members and graduate students often teach these types of curricula, and much solace can be found when working in collaborative environments. As Powell (2013) sees it, teaching teams can be a “source of collective wisdom” (p. 30). Nevertheless, the success of such teams hinges upon transparent communication, a clear understanding of expectations, and reciprocal trust (Richmond, Anderson, Tucker, & Powell, 2013). With this in mind, one of the major grievances that surfaced in our analysis was that communication was less than optimal. One of the teaching team members (from the 1st year course) expressed, “We weren't familiar with any of the assignments for the other class.”

Likewise, another teaching team member reflected on his confusion regarding his role in monitoring and evaluating the online discussion boards: “It might have been useful to meet with the TA's [of the 4th year course] a couple of times to try and figure out how this was going to work, and who was doing what, so we could have supervised [the students'] interactions more closely.”

The inclusion of graduate students as part of the teaching team should be both philosophical and pragmatic to ICD, but Richmond et al. (2013) noted that it is the collective responsibility of the entire team to establish course expectations, including role responsibilities, at the outset of the term. With regard to communicating course expectations, students also voiced some frustration. One 4th year student commented, “there was a lack of communication or clarification on the purpose of assignments” while another admitted to being “unsure of the structure of the discussions.” Maggie, the lead TA justified, “I think [the instructor] did a brilliant job setting the ICD up, but it was emerging faster than any of us could have anticipated, so it was just kind of on the fly at times”. Accordingly, Baldwin et al. (2013) indicate that clear and regular forms of communication between faculty, instructors, and students are imperative mechanisms for successful delivery of an integrated curriculum. Moreover, from their years of experience implementing an immersive curriculum approach, they recognize that the design of such programs is constantly evolving and never finished, but over time, each iteration is more effective and easier to deliver. We find comfort in this insight and advice, and anticipate that the future versions of our ICD will incorporate more routine check-ins with both the members of the teaching team and students. Furthermore, we hope to incorporate “multiple methods for two-way communication” (e.g., weekly email/newsletter, additional office hours, ICD discussion boards) to increase opportunities for openly communicating expectations and understandings among those involved, as well as a space for students to share excitement, worries, and frustrations about their experiences (Baldwin et al., 2013, p. 74).

Finally, the issue of communication was compounded by the fact that numerous groups were involved in the ICD, with varying things at stake. The two cohorts of students brought a variety of competencies and motivations to the table, which likely altered their participation, while the community members had their own vested interests. One of the 4th years remarked, “It was very

difficult to communicate with the employees from our attraction. I understand that they may be busy, but it would have been nice to have insight or ideas from them.” Relatedly, one of the teaching assistants observed the disappointment when community members could not fulfill their commitment: “A group was about to present and they were looking over to [the panel] to see who had showed up from the attractions, and the people from their attraction weren't there [...] I'm sure it took a little wind out of their sails.”

One approach to avoid this type of disappointment is to clarify which tourism enterprises are available and willing to engage with students throughout the duration of the term. Subsequently, industry and community representatives can commit to responsibilities and certain levels of participation (e.g., bi-weekly/monthly consultation with the student team evaluating them, mandatory attendance by at least one of their representatives at the final presentations) in advance. Outlining these commitments beforehand would certainly decrease the potential for miscommunication, and likely encourage more meaningful encounters.

However, as noted in previous research (Anderson, 2013; Breunig, 2014; Fenton & Gallant, 2016), we realized that to gain community and industry participation, additional efforts must be dedicated toward cultivating and nurturing partnerships. This can spread a professor's time thin. A potential strategy to combat overloading one's teaching schedule is to assign graduate students to act as campus-to-community liaisons. As such, they would oversee and assist the 4th year students with their interactions and communication with local organizations. By involving graduate teaching team members in this way, everyone experiences the benefits of teamwork, while also contributing to an important process of mentorship as a result graduates can learn about best pedagogical and management practices (Johnson & Pate, 2013).

#### 4.2.3. Adapting to new structural changes

Finally, it is worth mentioning the structural challenges we encountered in our first attempt at employing an ICD. Such challenges included the organization of course logistics. As mentioned, AWE was designed as an integrated project between students from a 1<sup>st</sup> year introductory course and a 4th year advanced seminar. These courses differ significantly in size, and are made up of a diverse range of students, who come with varying interests (including different majors) and

capabilities. A 4th year student commented, “To have classes integrated together is an amazing idea and could have so much potential, but I feel as though the 1st year class was way too big for the size of the 4th year class.” This sentiment was similarly echoed by the Karla, the course instructor:

One of the challenges to think about when integrating courses may be the class size. There was a significant imbalance between our 350 1st year students and our 22 4th year students, which made the discussion boards particularly challenging. For example, our 4th year students found it overwhelming because they were responsible for responding to a group of 20 1st year students. Mutually our TAs were challenged in overseeing the discussions in order to assign marks.

It is evident that course size does matter, not only from the perspective of minimizing the 4th year discussion board workload, but also from a management, monitoring, and evaluation standpoint.

The discussion boards reflected a student ratio of about fifteen 1st year students to every one, 4th year student. At times these logistical imbalances prompted disengagement. For instance, one of the 4th year students admittedly explained, “With the amount of questions that I was targeted with [in the discussions] and pressure to respond to each individual, I lost motivation to respond to the users.” Unfortunately, some of the 1st year students felt the effects of this lack of participation: “There was basically no communication between my group, and the [4th year] designers. They asked questions; we answered and asked some of our own questions but this was the end of the discussion as we did not receive any response.” Fourth years justified their disengagement because they perceived 1st years to lack care within their own interactions: “It is hard to put a lot of effort into responding to a student's post when it is obvious from their writing that they do not care about the topic matter.” Another student clarified,

The issue is not the idea [of integration], but rather the varying degrees of education [...] Since the 1st year course hosts over 300 students and does not have any pre-requisites, most students are not from tourism. This is not an issue as diversity of knowledge is not harmful, the issue is the lack of critical analysis from the students, due to their lack of knowledge in the applications of basic tourism based theories.

These incongruent aptitudes were also felt by some of the 1st year students: “Due to my age, inexperience, and lack of real world knowledge, I feel that myself and my opinions are usually undermined or overlooked.” Though we were aware of the potential threats of these course logistics (e.g., class size, varying academic majors, levels of ability) we ultimately did not make these structural decisions. Our inaugural ICD efforts and the documentation from this study, encouraged policy change. Specifically, in bringing our findings to our Department Chair, he determined it would be appropriate to adjust the class size of the Introduction to Tourism course, reducing numbers to 150 1st year students in the future ICD iterations. It is our belief that smaller class sizes will provide a learning environment more conducive to meeting objectives of deep learning.

As evidenced above, the virtual and online structure of our integrated discussion component inhibited some from active and confident participation. Accordingly one of the 1st year students suggested “discussions could have been improved by having face-to-face time with [the 4th year] designers to discuss issues, instead of waiting to hear replies online.” Relatedly, a 4th year student said, “To improve the discussions and make them more engaging, I would recommend small 1st year groups to meet face-to-face with small 4th year groups in the future.” With these student recommendations, we modified the curriculum design for the next iteration, adapting the integrated discussion from an online platform to a face-to-face format. With a reduced class size a face-to-face format will a viable option. Overall, our hope is that these structural changes will create a more inclusive classroom climate that engenders and upholds the ideals of co-learning, and empowers students to engage in these moments of education as a “horizontal relationship” built upon reciprocity and shared dialogue (Freire, 1973, p.43).

## **5. Conclusion**

The educational imprisonment described in Livingston's (2016) Harvard Graduate speech, resonates in critiques of traditional pedagogical approaches; and calls for innovation and educational reform. The aim of this paper was to explore the value of an Integrated Curriculum Design (ICD). Our findings join other tourism scholars who challenge traditional models of education (Belhassen & Caton, 2011; Boluk & Carnicelli, 2019; Carnicelli & Boluk, 2017; Paddison & Mortimer, 2016). As portrayed in the outset of this paper, our ICD was positioned as



an opportunity to flip the roles of students as passive receivers, and instructors the purveyors of knowledge (Freire, 1970) in order to intentionally consider learning-teaching relationships, and increase student, faculty, and community engagement.

Analysis of findings highlighted 1st year students as competent experience users and evaluators, 4th year students as capable tourism consultants, and teaching assistants as formal teaching team members. Furthermore, as signaled by Anderson's (2013) work, community/industry partners were integral to fulfilling the applied business-knowledge gap of our academic teaching team. Overall, the integration of the two core courses within our Tourism Program fostered opportunities for deep learning and active participation by both cohorts of students within the classroom and in the broader community. Changing the learning contexts, an ICD can create an authentic learning environment – one that resembles real-life (Paddison & Mortimer, 2016), thereby motivating and empowering students to work collectively and think critically to creatively solve problems.

Moreover, as evidenced by our research, formally trialing pedagogical approaches holds potential for realizing how teaching models may be improved for future iterations. Specifically, student reflections revealed preferences around specific learning methods such as face-to-face discussions rather than the virtual discussion forum, while the necessity for a smaller offering of our 1st year course was made evident to our Department. Findings also revealed communication challenges, requiring more explicit intentions and expectations to be agreed upon from the outset of the design and delivery of an ICD. Such consideration will be important for any instructor interested in implementing an ICD, to engender healthier “horizontal relationships” across students, members of the teaching team, as well as the community partners whom with we engage.

Beyond the practical pedagogical advice, this research makes contributions to the nascent scholarship on ICD within the tourism scholarship. Specifically, our research consciously considered how ICD enhances the relevancy of tourism curriculum and embeds it in local problems. Our research extends a solution to the failed curricula promises noted by Tribe's (2000; 2001; 2008) scholarship; an ICD can develop work-ready talent – capable and critical

managers – the kind of people who will strengthen the tourism industry. However, the limited research examining ICD calls for further research, specifically from the industry and community perspectives to determine opportunities, challenges, and value generated to ensure the sustainability of partnerships garnered in ICD models.

Finally, future work could be conducted around resistance and ICD, to further understand the types of relationships necessitated to design and employ and ICD. Truthfully, we as a design team encountered discomfort in our development process. Resembling a cautionary positioning, we believe that these feelings reflected the uncertainties that accompany the integral epistemological shift required by ICD. This transition not only entailed university and department buy-in (Paisley et al., 2013; Powell, James, et al., 2013), but also necessitated openness and relationships built on trust. It was about determining “where can we start?“, harnessing the challenge, thinking differently about curriculum, and not being scared to branch out and change. We recognize that this can be challenging given the neoliberal pressures felt by faculty members, balancing the tripartite of research, teaching and service and who are often tethered to their teaching evaluations for their performance reviews and tenure. Perhaps additional pedagogical research like ours can be a starting point to re-envision the limits of tourism programs and curriculum, providing rationale and evidence for institutions to create space for scholars to “play with pedagogy” (Powell, James, et al., 2013) – to “Lift Off!”

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