

With Their Permission
*Skeptics, Resisters, and Supporters*¹

Gwynn M. Powell
University of Georgia

Joy James
Appalachian State University

Corey W. Johnson
University of Georgia

Abstract

No major change in thought or action occurs without mistakes, casualties and growth. This article is designed to examine the implementation of integrated curriculum design from a more critical perspective. While the integrated curriculum innovators were confident about the design and their process, not all of their colleagues were interested in the change or agreed it was effective. Thus, the goal of this article is to give voice to the concerns of those who are not directly engaged in the implementation, in an effort to reveal some of the more personal ramifications of the process, highlight the evolution of thinking as the process matured and to offer advice

Gwynn M. Powell was a professor in the Recreation and Leisure Studies program at the University of Georgia Recreation at the time this publication, but since has transitioned to Clemson University.

Joy James is an associate professor in the Recreation Management Program at Appalachian State University.

Corey W. Johnson is an associate professor in the Recreation and Leisure Studies program at the University of Georgia Recreation.

¹The content for this article is drawn from solicited feedback and conversation with our colleagues who were not directly engaged with the initial implementation of the integrated curriculum at the University of Georgia, Clemson, and the University of Utah. Although the comments are anecdotal, we tried to represent the spirit and language of the commentator whenever possible. We also recommend Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb (1995).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gwynn M. Powell, 263 Lehotsky Hall, Clemson, SC 29634-0735, gwynnp@clemson.edu

No major change in thought or action occurs without mistakes, casualties, and growth. The integrated curriculum design described in this special issue occurred within a higher education context that has the benefit of cycles and annual opportunities for relatively new beginnings compared to those of corporate learning environments. Consequently higher education can easily foster routine or provide fertile ground for innovation. This article is designed to examine the implementation of integrated curriculum design from a more critical perspective. While the integrated curriculum innovators were confident about the design and their process, not all of their colleagues were interested in the change or agreed it was effective. Thus, the goal of this article is to give voice to the concerns of those who are not directly engaged in the implementation, in an effort to reveal some of the more personal ramifications of the process, highlight the evolution of thinking as the process matured and to offer advice for moving forward in the face of skepticism, reluctance and resistance. This information is offered to point out potential “pit falls” so that innovators might negotiate them, to engage the skeptics (and it is natural and healthy for multiple perspectives to exist) with a form of solace that one is not alone if not “on board,” and to give hope to both innovators and skeptics that changes of perception are possible during the process.

Getting the Green Light

“The timing was right for us to do something very creative. Others talk about ‘thinking outside the box.’ We threw the box away (and recycled it, of course)!”

—(Wright, 2012, personal communication)

Ideas for change and innovation come from a multitude of places, but in academe, innovators quickly end up starting a conversation with the gatekeeper, most often their department head. The department heads at UGA, Clemson, and Utah concur that some ingredients are necessary within the unit to increase the chance of success. The idea needs a champion who is willing to see the big picture and manage a million details while withstanding criticism from colleagues, staff, administrators, as well as students. Both the chair and the innovation team need to be willing to weather the growing pains and navigate varying levels of uncertainty. As the ideas and process move forward, there needs to be a level of confidence that the approach will yield the desired outcomes, but it must also be tempered with open-mindedness. It is vital to allow skeptics and resisters space to change their perceptions as their thinking and experience with an integrated curriculum evolves, and in addition, the ability for the innovators to forgive those who change their thinking by not holding grudges or picking at old scars. If the idea starts from a place of dissatisfaction with the current situation (even if small) then at some level others likely need to be willing to admit that some change is needed. This willingness to admit that a change is needed could be complicated in that the skeptics and the resisters might have been the ones who designed what is now considered the status quo, but it was cutting edge at the time they created it.

Given this cautionary introduction to a path riddled with potential pitfalls, why did our department heads say “yes” and green light the road to innovation? Status quo is comfortable and not risky; however, they perceived tremendous potential for reward

for the students. As supporters of the integrated curriculum design, they had faith in the ideas and skills of their faculty. The department heads recognized this innovative approach had aspects capitalizing on the needs and skills of the current generation of undergraduates. The integrated curriculum design emphasizes engagement and application in a context that connects students to each other, to the faculty and to the local community. Currently, undergraduates think of themselves as the “multiple choice generation” (having been raised with so many standardized tests), so utilizing creative approaches that tap into their multimedia environment allows them to be part of a family or team atmosphere, which has the benefit for the department’s retention, institutional satisfaction, and subsequent learning.

By giving the green light and (re)visioning the future, department chairs acknowledged the potential educational benefits outweigh the costs. Additionally, from the institutional perspective, integrated curriculum design offered ways to include social justice and community engagement as core principals, which are good for the reputation of the unit. With a focus on problem-centered learning, the educational content is made relevant inside and outside the classroom. This creative approach to pedagogy is built on basic tenets of college student development in a way that traditional educational models are not (see Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). However, do not pass “go” without a sincere commitment from departmental leadership, because without that support it will be difficult to move toward integrated models.

Voice To the Concerns

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. Skepticism has great value in giving voice to questions, concerns, and challenges. Resistance is often painful when met, but usually can strengthen the process overall. Innovators should not only expect skepticism and resistance, but welcome multiple perspectives to make the innovation the best it can be. Each of our three institutions had different experiences with levels of engagement and resistance in the process of implementing the integrated curriculum design. However, several common concerns were voiced across all three and included logistics, quality content, faculty roles, and assessment. The discussion that follows sheds light on these common concerns to help innovators be better equipped to process with our skeptics and resisters.

Logistics

Higher education institutions are highly bureaucratic environments with administrative logistics that can create fear in the heart of any innovator and prevent creative ideas from ever being attempted. Logistics seem to be the most common stumbling block focused on when introducing the idea of an integrated curriculum. Logistical concerns included students, scheduling, enrollment, and the curriculum approval process. Students are at the heart of what we do. Institutional priority is to get students to graduation with quality curriculum bounded by a system of necessary credit hours, general education credits, and degree requirements. So how does the integrated curriculum design handle students who are not a “typical” or traditional student (such as a transfer student, a student changing a major in the senior year, or

a part-time student)? It is true that using the integrated model does not mean you can accommodate every student in every instance. Therefore, it is key at the outset to design your program to meet the needs of the students you “want” to represent you as the graduates of your program. In some cases, a boundary was placed that in order to graduate students needed to complete the full integrated model, while other institutions have offered both an integrated or traditional track.

This particular pedagogy integrates three to four courses, so it begs the questions, “Will there be one grade for the ‘mega course’ or separate grades for specific portions? What if a student does not pass a portion of the course?” At UGA (due to the way courses are loaded into the curriculum system), students earn four separate grades, which they can monitor at all times via their learning management system. On the rare occasion that a student fails, he can repeat one course as an independent study, but if he fails two or more, he must retake the whole semester the following year. The courses that were passed are then counted as supportive coursework or electives in the student’s program of study.

Scheduling is another aspect to consider in that the design assumes the same amount of instructor-student contact, just configured in a different way. Using blocked timeframes in the same classroom space created a continuous lengthy period of time for detailed projects and field trips, but from behind the scenes it did create challenges with obtaining classroom space, making sure students were able to take other courses across campus and giving up flexibility of including non-majors in our courses. If the course is truly blended as one multicredit course, then institutional support for effectively communicating to the registrar and curriculum gatekeepers (advisors, curriculum committees, athletics, etc.) that the course is actually one course that was traditionally three or four separate courses is a necessity. Some institutions kept the courses separate at registration level by listing them as corequisites and blending them through implementation rather than registration. Each institution found different solutions to the obstacles, but the anticipation of the logistical questions and brainstorming a range of answers was the key to all of us clearing those hurdles.

Quality Content

Quality content is on the radar of skeptics and innovators alike. Vital to quality content is discussions with the innovation team that breaks down the process of helping the learner learn. The integrated curriculum design is a shift for a student who has gone through traditional “schooling” experiences so clarity around topics, assessment, and expectations are critical. Faculty need to consider how separate topics will be covered and assessed, engaging in the age-old debate of depth versus breadth. Consistencies across the teaching team regarding key messages from each lecture, activity and assignment will help the students follow the logic of the layering effect possible through integrated curriculum design.

Faculty Roles

Many faculties in academia suffer the “silo effect,” which fosters isolation from each other due to both different content area expertise, and the common pressures of teaching, research and service. Most faculty members want their students to engage in learning; however, their perception of the time available and their fear to give up autonomy may impact their willingness to be a part of a teaching team. Faculty

roles in the integrated curriculum design are open to discussion, clarification, and modification as part of the team process. Workload is the biggest question raised: Will it be more work? The common response is that the initial set-up requires more of an investment, but once the system is in place, the teaching team members are polishing ideas rather than building them. It is at this stage that the workload feels more equitable. In fact, the design actually can yield a level of flexibility that allows for content to be grouped based on both conceptual and scheduling needs. For example, a specific faculty member may be in the classroom each day for a week, but then have the next two weeks to focus on a research or service activity with little to no engagement with students. Autonomy is highly valued, yet the integrated curriculum design pedagogy also relies heavily on collaboration. Faculty must be open to others knowing they are human and make mistakes, be willing to create consistent grading styles, and to plan ahead rather than the night before the class. Additionally, faculty may worry about carrying the burden of work or others not fulfilling their obligation. When courses are taught in a stand-alone fashion, faculty can get into a routine and any change would require flexibility. The integrated design offers flexibility within what would have been “a course,” in addition to the overall 3-4 course design. But as the new system takes shape, that can be viewed as stability by the faculty within the system and inflexibility by those outside the system. All institutions have struggled with transitions of personnel. All teaching team members hope for rotations in and out, but also seek to balance that with the steep learning curve of coming into a new system and the time invested by the innovators. Once it is working smoothly, there is a reticence to potentially upset the delicate balance, but we have always found that “instability” also often breeds creativity and questioning of how to make something better.

Assessment

As with any change, there is natural skepticism about whether it will work and what evidence will be used to measure it. How will we know if the experiment worked? All in higher education are held accountable to external measuring sticks. Being able to name the elements of the formative and summative assessment plan (traditional course evaluations, exit feedback, student engagement data, etc.) and invite additional suggestions (external monitors, saving past materials to compare, etc.) are vital to this process. Assessment should not just be formal evaluations at the end of the semester, but instead integrated into the course throughout the semester with multiple data sources so that adaptations, corrections, and improvements can be made as needed. Assessment is not only about the student acquisition of content but the teaching collaboration itself. It is important to agree up front about the evaluation plan and communicate that process with others not directly involved so that all agree to “stick with the plan” and not strike out on their own independent investigation that can derail the confidence. As academics, we all know the value of assessment, but we sometimes fall into a routine of only meeting required institutional assessment procedures. It is not as common to seek additional methods of gaining feedback. This success of the integrated curriculum design is made of many parts, but Kolb’s (1983) recursive experiential learning theory is key. Having a wide variety of feedback inputs allows for richer reflection and subsequent improvements to implementation.

Personal Ramifications Revealed

The faculty role is only one facet that defines us. Within that role, there is a human being with emotions and feelings. It is significant to recognize the feelings of the skeptics and resisters. The innovation is an exercise in community building for those directly involved, yet other faculty can feel “left out” and “in the dark.” Even if they are interested and supportive, they may be unclear and uncomfortable about what is happening in their unit, so it may be more difficult for them to trust the implementation and support it. Academe does not automatically breed community; thus, faculty can be territorial and jealous of the support given to the innovation team (financial and supplies, grad students, priority for classroom and times). With the implementation there is often a high level of energy and engagement as new ideas begin to work and the laughter and excitement spill into the hallway. Any time there is subgroup working on something, there is a political risk for those who are “in” and those who are “out.” As silos within our departments, we are specialists, yet this pedagogy expects us to be a “Jack/Jill of all trades” for maximum flexibility or targeted specialization agreed upon in advance. Some faculty members do not want to be generalists, but rather excellent specialists. For some there may be a desire to be “in” but are not a part for a multitude of reasons, and then others who might be “in” but would rather be “out” but do not know how to do it gracefully. In addition, as there are growing pains, the need to keep the “dirty laundry” within the team becomes challenging yet important as challenges and mistakes can be viewed as juicy gossip about aspects that are not working smoothly. We all know how one word or phrase can be taken out of context and ignite a heap of criticism or misunderstanding.

Inherent to experiential education is its engagement with the whole person, not just the academic content. Some label that as “touchy, feely” and they lack experience and/or comfort with engaging from a different perspective. Many faculty members have been trained in “objectivity,” which could lead to maintaining a distance from or to students. Different pedagogical approaches cause an uncertainty about being closer to the students as changes in traditional faculty-student relationships occur. In addition to faculty, management of graduate students who are involved in teaching is important. In this innovation, faculty is not only more dependent on them but also more connected. When success is achieved there is excitement and happiness, when mistakes occur, the flipside of those feelings occur as well. Particularly for faculty and graduate students, navigating the role of coworkers on a teaching team, while still acknowledging the power differentials takes intentional communication that can be painful. The integrated curriculum challenges our assumptions of the status quo, it questions how we have taught in the past and forces change.

Evolution of Thinking

By listening to the dissenting voices and engaging with the issues they raised, there is an excellent opportunity to strengthen the implementation of an integrated curriculum. If ideas from the resisters and skeptics are dismissed, those feelings can fester and ignite fires in unexpected places. All three institutions saw evolution in the thinking and perceptions of faculty not directly involved in the implementation. Some former resisters saw the phenomenal activities taking place due to the restructured timeframes and realignment of faculty expertise that led to engagement and higher

quality projects. The data from the student engagement surveys could be compared to the institutional average providing external comparison points. Some faculty realized that their initial concerns were driven by outdated ways of thinking about teaching and how students engage with content and each other. During internship placements, both site and faculty supervisors saw a different level of content and skill application as evidenced by site supervisor ratings on exit surveys and observed by faculty in reviewing reflection assignments.

The basic theoretical framework for integrated curriculum design is based on the progressive education movement started by John Dewey (1916) in the early 1900s. Change is incremental; it is often painful and exhilarating. Be patient and willing to be surprised as colleagues absorb evidence and change their minds about what they were once naturally skeptical about, but also do not focus all your energy on trying to convince them. Do the best work possible (grounded in theory, experience, and feedback) and engage with people wherever they are in the process of dealing with change.

Strategies to Navigate Differing Levels of Engagement and Buy-In

Based on the synthesis of the information shared by the skeptics and resisters and explained in the preceding sections of this article, we offer the following strategies to prepare and embrace the diverse views of the implementation:

- Brainstorm all of the challenges you anticipate based on logistics and personalities; be ready to troubleshoot.
- Be ready to listen to the critique and modify what is needed or explain why you are not changing it; be persuasive about the vision.
- Faculty may question or complain, but they also get wrapped up in their own work, so make changes within your span of control; use positive outcomes as evidence to seek bigger change.
- As good things start to happen, other people will want to engage: look for ways to showcase the good without bragging (document service learning hours, community engagement, projects, press releases, etc.).
- Use an outside observe and teaching mentor. They can help troubleshoot, frame the criticism without a personal investment, spread the good news and offer others perspective.
- Pay attention to use of language and word choice with students and faculty colleagues; a side comment can help a person feel included or launch an attack.
- Allow people to opt in, don't force them; be open to exit strategies.
- Some people will never get on board (or admit that they are on board) as the culture of status quo is very strong and supports individuals not motivated to change; do not focus your energy on them, but instead on your teaching team
- Student culture will shift and then take on a life of its own; by design you can connect them or separate them across cohorts.
- Include a variety of faculty styles to have credibility, critical engagement, and various role models; celebrate each other's accomplishments.
- Develop a strong, consistent message about the assumptions of the teaching team that outline the elements of why the change is needed, the motivations for the choices made, and the expected outcomes for students and faculty: a "This I Believe" to be true about the integrated curriculum implementation.

Moving Forward (Advice from the Department Heads)

This article gave voice to the multiple perspectives (skeptics, resisters, and supporters) around integrated curriculum design. While there are pitfalls to avoid and obstacles to overcome, it is important to be intentional with preparation, implementation, and reflection so that the course can be improved as new information emerges. Department heads from participating institutions offer the following advice about how to move forward with your own institutional innovation.

Do not go into this naively. To make it work, you need energized and dedicated faculty. It requires a long-term commitment. If successful, I think you can make the case that it is what we call here at Utah a “signature” learning experience. It is something special. (Dustin, 2012, personal communication)

Don't be afraid to try new approaches to delivering course material...give the faculty room to create...consider the student's developmental processes when designing new methods, and you will see that these ideas make sense for this generation. Challenge and support led to a RLST family! (Cooper, 2012, personal communication)

Be bold. Try something new. Be prepared for pushback and work through it. The first two weeks of EDGE were chaotic. Parents, students, and other faculty were calling asking me what we were doing. I knew we would have a few bumps along the way, but I also knew that we could work through it ... we did. And now, students who did not go through the EDGE program are lamenting the fact they did not. For the last three years, this program has been the talk of campus! (Wright, 2012, personal communication)

Let these words sink in: “signature learning experience,” “Don't be afraid,” and “Be bold.” These administrators were not directly involved in teaching the integrated curriculum design, yet they feel a part of it and acknowledge its power for student-centered learning!

Bottom Line: You Are Ready to Mobilize

- Only “pass go” if you have department head support, and there is a tolerance for innovation (even a small one).
- Seek energized, collaborative, dedicated faculty and graduate students who share a vision of student outcomes and have a long-term commitment to ride the growing pains of the first two to three years.
- Be bold and revolutionary, but be prepared for push-back and use your best problem-solving skills to work through it.
- Take the ideas, let them simmer, and then make it right for your team and institution by building on “your” skill set.
- Come visit Athens, Clemson, or Salt Lake City; we are happy to model behavior, share resources, or assist you on your journey.

References

- Boyatzis, R. E., Cowen, S. S., & Kolb, D. A. (1995) *Innovation in professional education: Steps on a journey from teaching to learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2009). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kolb, D. A. (1983). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.