

The EDGE of Learning

Clemson University Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management Immersion Semester

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Abstract

This article describes the process of design and implementation of a non-traditional delivery of the core introduction to the Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management (PRTM) coursework within the structure of a traditional research university, Clemson University in SC. A complete description of the reasons for the design of a new curriculum delivery, context for incorporating experiential learning, and mechanisms for achieving learning outcomes are presented. The program, now called the PRTM EDGE, which stands for Engaging in Diverse Guided Experiences, has been in practice for four years and has served over 500 students. This allows authors to share lessons learned related to the best of what we have done, and what we have changed over time and why. Despite changes, the program has experienced success in terms of student bonding with each other and faculty, increasing hands-on experience with many aspects of the PRTM field, and understanding of the interconnections between the diverse parts of the PRTM field as well as individual critical thinking through the use of a learning portfolio.

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Introduction

As professors in a Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management Department (PRTM) we teach many students who have chosen the major because they are passionate about some aspect of the actual practice of PRTM. How can we expect them to continue to hold on to that passion if we teach primarily in classrooms and within traditional course structures, separated from the field they are so interested in being part of? The traditional structure of classes can become like a prison to innovation and a refuge for silos. As Hockings, Cooke, and Bowl (2007) argued, the persistence of traditional pedagogical approaches is a crucial factor impacting the engagement of students in contemporary higher education. In an attempt to leave behind the silos of individual classes designed to deliver our core curriculum in a 50-minute format three times a week or 75 minutes twice a week, a team of faculty in the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management (PRTM) Department at Clemson University designed a completely new immersive undergraduate experience.

In 2009, Clemson University's PRTM Department (PRTM) launched an immersion program for all sophomore and transfer students entering the major. The program is now called the PRTM EDGE program, which stands for Engaging in Diverse Guided Experiences, and we have learned many lessons about implementing an alternative curriculum approach within the traditional structure of a university. The EDGE semester is designed to deliver the core content all PRTM students need regardless of emphasis area in the major. Once students complete the EDGE semester, they can then focus on a specific emphasis in the final two and a half years as PRTM students. EDGE serves as a mechanism for increasing student engagement with each other, with faculty, and with the course material. This increased engagement facilitates a substantive learning that has made teaching and learning more personal, more effective and more meaningful.

The desire for alternative curriculum delivery that deviates from the traditional university format, integrates disciplines and uses multiple forms of teaching, is not a new one. Alternative programs appeared in the U.S. in the 1970s, both field-based and campus-based in delivery. The challenge of the PRTM faculty was to achieve a new framework within a land grant state institution with tenure-track faculty. Current visions of reform include integrated models with a focus on true interdisciplinary work, designed to train "knowledge workers" who are able to work collaboratively. Such reform incorporates experience in the "real world" solving problems and the ability to address problems with multiple modes of inquiry (Gibbons, 1998; Schneider & Shoenburg, 1998; Szostak, 2003). This type of reform requires a team approach to re-design curriculum, bringing together faculty with diverse pedagogical philosophies, to accommodate large-scale needs such as changing accreditation standards and teaching in large blocks of time that do not fit standard class schedules. New delivery methods also require more, not less, faculty guidance of students as they navigate this type of learning environment (Kirshner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Sperandio, Grudzinski-Hall, & Stewart-Gambino, 2010).

Currently, the EDGE program is preparing for the fifth group of students. In its previous four semesters, the program has served over 550 students. During PRTM EDGE, students spend the semester taking a common 12-credit core, composed of four courses and an undergraduate research class called Creative Inquiry. There is no set time to meet, no set location for meeting, and no permanent instructor. Sometimes

students meet in groups of 8, 16, 32 or 120. Sometimes they meet in a classroom, a computer lab, an auditorium, a conference room or the forest. Sometimes they receive a lecture, work on a business plan, present a report, complete a logic model, or go on an extended field trip. A team of faculty and graduate students deliver the content in whatever size, setting, and modality best fits the task and desired learning outcomes. The PRTM EDGE philosophy is based on a belief that learning should occur whenever, wherever, with whomever, and however best facilitates an authentic connection between student, faculty, and content.

To understand the complexity of the process of creating an entirely new model of teaching and learning within the structure of a research institution, this paper will describe the context of the Clemson University PRTM program, our vision for the immersion program, the current EDGE program, and finally our major lessons learned.

The Context of the Clemson PRTM Department

Clemson University is a land grant institution in the upstate of South Carolina with approximately 18,000 students. Clemson University has five colleges, and the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management (PRTM) Department is housed in the College of Health Education and Human Development (HEHD). The PRTM Department supports approximately 500 undergraduates a year and these undergraduates choose between five emphasis areas: 1) Parks and Conservation Area Management, 2) Community Recreation, Sport and Camp Management, 3) Therapeutic Recreation, 4) Travel and Tourism, and 5) Professional Golf Management. The first four also have active research programs with both masters and doctoral programs.

In 2007, members of the PRTM faculty decided that we needed to better integrate service learning, undergraduate research, field learning, technology, and other diverse pedagogical tools into the curriculum. This decision was based on evidence demonstrating that such integrated approaches to education can be very effective increased engagement of students in learning outcomes, as well at being more competitive in the job market once out of school (Gibbons, 1998; Schneider & Shoenburg, 1998; Szostak, 2003; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Sperandio et al., 2010). However, the traditional model of course instruction did not lend itself well to implementing these teaching strategies or taking advantage of outside the classroom experiences. Scheduling field trips and other immersive experiences was often difficult due to students' course schedules. These challenges inspired our interest in rethinking PRTM undergraduate curriculum delivery.

Two additional factors guided our decision to rethink our curriculum delivery methods. One was the expectation laid out by the PRTM Department's accreditation through the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA). NRPA outlines learning objectives and outcomes that academic programs must meet. Traditionally, we matched these objectives and outcomes and to existing courses, but changes in the NRPA objectives in 2008 provided us the opportunity to rethink our PRTM course structure as we tried to incorporate the new NRPA standards. The second factor was encouragement from the college of HEHD for the development of strategies that prepare students to lead and work in an integrated community system of human resources. The timing of the HEHD college-wide effort supported a curriculum change in PRTM. The accrediting body changes and the college-level changes encouraged a more integrated

understanding of the student experience and informed what knowledge, skills and abilities our students should gain during their college experience as PRTM students.

The PRTM faculty knew that we wanted to explore delivery in a non-traditional format; however, students would still need to address their General Education requirements. At Clemson University, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee sets General Education guidelines, with faculties in each department deciding specific course requirements for their students that meet the set guidelines. One of the first decisions we made, as a department was to reconsider the sequence students moved through in the PRTM curriculum. The idea behind general education (math, science, writing, social sciences, and humanities) is that it provides the foundational knowledge necessary to undertake and complete a program of study. The old version of our curriculum had students taking general education requirements throughout their four (or five) years at Clemson. Consequently, a primary goal of the new version of the curriculum was to ensure that students completed their general education courses during their first three semesters. This rearrangement not only seemed to offer a more logical sequence of course progression for students, but also allowed us the flexibility to offer our core and concentration courses in non-traditional formats.

Similarly, the PRTM sequence was designed for students to first engage with core curriculum at the beginning of their major courses, providing a foundation for the general profession (such as leadership and group process, legal foundations, facilities management, and program planning), and then pursue classes required by their emphasis area in the last two years. Despite these intentions, there existed no requirement mandating the preferred course sequence. With 150 or more students wanting nine core classes, it was difficult to schedule all core content for the sophomore year. As a result, many students were completing their core foundational courses for the major in their senior year. This situation became a final factor that motivated the faculty in our department to embrace the idea of a re-designed core curriculum that was more effective and also more efficient in terms of sequence.

Developing a New Vision for the PRTM Undergraduate Program

Due to the catalysts described above, a team of five faculty members of the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management (PRTM) Department was formed to develop a plan for a nontraditional approach to delivering core curriculum. The team consisted of representatives of four of the department's emphasis areas: Community Recreation, Sport and Camp Management, Therapeutic Recreation, Parks and Conservation Area Management and Travel and Tourism. The Professional Golf Management program, though not represented on the faculty team, was consulted at each step as to how the development of a program would work with their set curriculum standards. Leadership from the PRTM Department,

the Health Education and Human Development (HEHD) Dean and the Provost at Clemson gave the faculty team free creative reign to redesign a new delivery of the course objectives.

In early meetings, we looked for overlap in the course objectives across the nine core courses being offered (Figure 1) and compared the course objectives to the NRPA course objectives, eliminating redundant courses and course objectives no longer called for in the core learning objectives. We then identified broad categories for organizing the course objectives that remained, which resulted in five categories: conceptual foundations, delivery systems, programming, legal liability, and management. We decided the first category would inform course content in the semester preceding an immersion experience. The latter four would form the basis of an immersion semester—a semester planned and called the PRTM Immersion. We also added the undergraduate research component called Creative Inquiry to build in a more robust form of research and evaluation that would begin in the Immersion semester and continue through the senior year. Further, the faculty aimed to address the college of HEHD's six learner dispositions during the immersion semester, which are focused on students ability to:

- Possess skills necessary to work collaboratively with individuals, families, and community groups from diverse backgrounds;
- Possess skills necessary to lead effectively and creatively in complex and changing environments and to become agents of change;

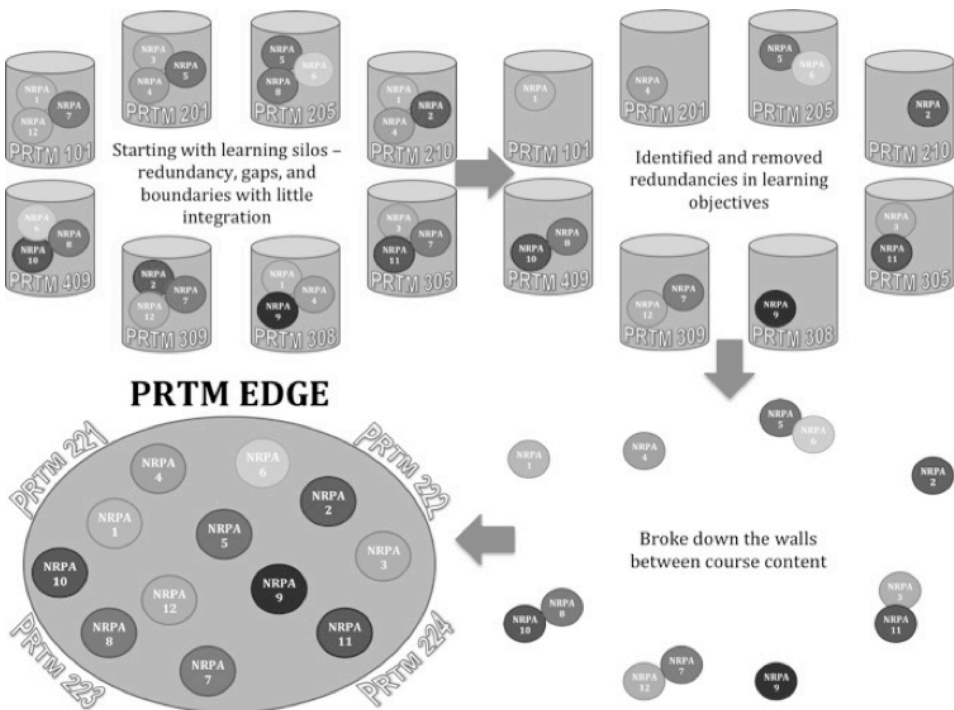


Figure 1. PRTM Undergraduate Curriculum Redesign Process

- Demonstrate flexibility, resilience, and adaptability, caring, ethical decision making and ethical conduct;
- Possess knowledge of organizational behavior and how governance and systems work;
- Engage in professional development for continual growth and lifelong learning; and
- Attain a global perspective and level of knowledge and skill necessary to succeed in a complex global economy.

In rethinking our curriculum content, we wanted to also address the sequencing issues in our curriculum. Our goal was to have students progress through general education requirements, the PRTM core courses, and then emphasis area courses. Under the redesigned curriculum, students first completed their general education requirements and electives during their freshman year at Clemson. They then completed a three-credit introductory PRTM course during their next semester at Clemson followed by our core immersion semester in the spring of their sophomore year. The proposal for the immersion semester was for a five to seven faculty member team to facilitate a 12-credit experience, involving an estimated 85-100 students with a student-faculty ratio at or below 19:1. Rather than the traditional format, where students were enrolled in courses meeting 3 times a week for 50 minutes, students in the immersion semester would be given a block schedule which required them to allot Monday–Thursday, 9 a.m. – 2 p.m., to the immersion semester. Further, students would not be allowed to enroll in classes outside of PRTM. This design allowed for a creative and flexible schedule for how, when, and where we would teach, interact with, and mentor our students in the immersion semester.

The plan for the immersion semester was to deliver content in an integrated, nimble manner. Experiences during the immersion semester would use multiple methods of delivery, including large group lectures and speaker series; small group discussions; synchronous and asynchronous online learning activities; applied projects; assessment, evaluation, and other research activities; and multiday site visits to meet and interact with professionals in the field and learn first hand about the facilities and programs they offer and issues they face on a daily basis. Traditional exams and quizzes were incorporated into the design, but as supplementary to preparing for experiences. The faculty planned to evaluate student performance using a combination of journaling, research papers, technical reports, discussion boards, website development, and other technological applications. The plan included grading students across four separate courses that made up the immersion semester. These were: Principles of Management (4 credits), Program Planning (3 credits), Delivery Systems (3 credits), and Legal Foundations (2 credits).

The faculty wanted the connections forged during the immersion semester to persist into the students' remaining two years at Clemson, as they completed work in their respective emphasis areas. Further, there existed a need in our curriculum to teach students research and evaluation methods. To achieve these ends, the faculty team decided to incorporate a program called Creative Inquiry, a Clemson University undergraduate research program, into the immersion semester. Student teams would write a research proposal in the immersion semester, and the following three semesters were to carry out a research project with a faculty mentor. The culminating Creative

Inquiry project for students was planned as a research presentation to their peers, and when appropriate, at state, regional, and national conferences. The four semesters of Creative Inquiry was required, so attrition happened only with change of major or early graduation, and in that case students took the third year for more credit hours.

In planning the evaluation and assessment for the immersion semester, faculty aimed to address different learning styles and multiple methods for measuring success for students. For example, several student grades focused on practical experiences, such as a multiday field trip and volunteer experiences in the local community. These experiences would incorporate reflection papers and journals, as well as carry a heavy penalty for not participating. A significant portion of the students' grade would rest on a learning portfolio, a journal that students would carry with them to document their thinking related to course material (readings, lectures and experiences) and to connect personally with the material. This learning portfolio would be handwritten and turned in each week to a faculty mentor. Students would also be graded using quizzes to support the assigned readings, class lectures and a final exam given in oral, essay and multiple-choice formats.

A final piece of the immersion semester vision was to ensure that the team of faculty teaching in the immersion semester must be from diverse disciplines within the broad field of PRTM. Additionally, the initial faculty team would implement the immersion semester for a three-year period, and then cycle out and new faculty would cycle in to the team. Such a rotation would balance the time consuming nature of the immersion semester, as well as generate a diversity of input into the program.

Description of the Current EDGE Semester

The plans described above have now been implemented over four immersion semesters and though the original philosophy remains, the immersion program has experience several improvements to reach its current form. First, on a basic level, the immersion semester has undergone a name change. The name 'immersion semester' produced confusion within the program, and those outside the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management (PRTM) department changed "immersion" to several variations including "immersive," "immersed," and even "submersion." Consequently, the faculty team changed the name of the semester to PRTM EDGE, which stands for Engaging in Diverse Guided Experiences. The semester takes place, as planned, in the spring of the sophomore year. There are six faculty team members currently teaching in the program with seven graduate students serving as teaching assistants.

In addition to whole group activities, each EDGE student is assigned to two smaller work groups (roughly 25 students), each led by a faculty member and a graduate student (Figure 2). The two groups are a Program Planning Group (PPG) and a Field Trip/Research group. The PPG develops a program plan during the semester for a real organization. This group meets for three hours each week to engage in course exercises to re-enforce weekly topics and to incorporate the learning into the development of the program. In addition to planning their program on paper, the group also implements part of the program plan for a one-hour session in April to other students in the EDGE semester. The PPG also serves as a structure for faculty grading learning portfolios and conducting performance evaluations of students overall engagement and growth throughout the semester. The trip group has three functions, first a group that will be together on the three-day field trip early in the semester; second as a weekly debriefing

group for the end of each week; and third as a research group starting the four-semester Creative Inquiry project.

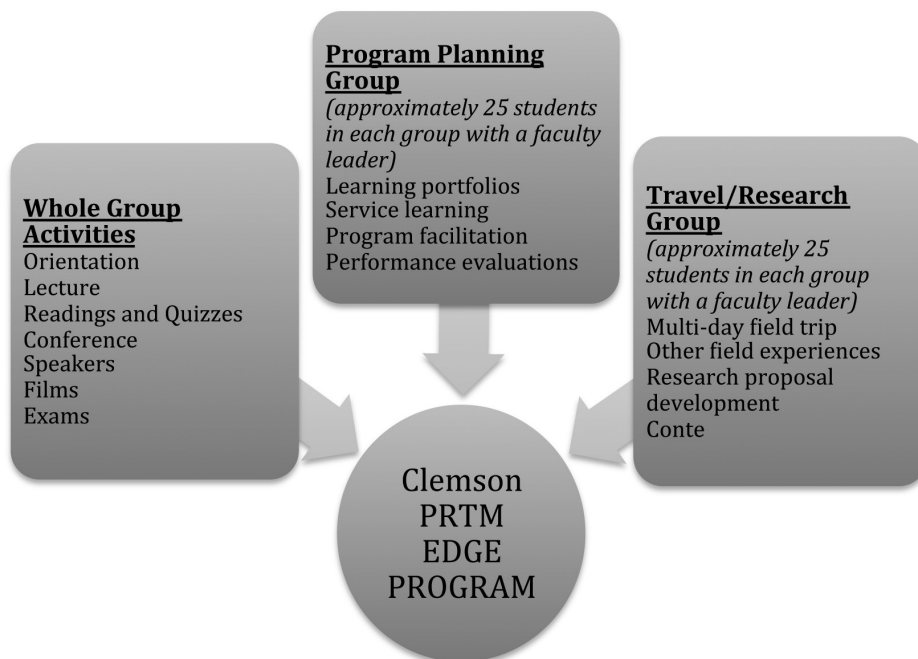


Figure 2. The Current Structure of the EDGE Program

Each week of the EDGE program covers a different content theme. One member of the faculty team leads each theme week, so each can be flexible within this framework, and grading of assignments each week can be consistent. Each theme week follows a common content delivery pattern. Monday is content day in the form of lectures and films, and includes a reading quiz. Tuesday and Wednesday consist of practical hands-on experiences, work on the program plans, and assignments either in groups or as individuals. Thursday is a day to process the learning from the week and work on the Creative Inquiry projects. We do this in a 9 a.m. – 2 p.m., Monday to Thursday framework. This pattern follows the experiential model set forth by John Dewey, requiring a preparation for experiences in learning, the experiences and then a mechanism for processing the experiences (Dewey, 1938). In addition to these theme weeks, students also take part in week-long experiences including an EDGE orientation, a three-day field trip to meet with PRTM professionals, a conference on the Clemson campus to bring in outside speakers for students, and practical experiences in the local community.

Student assessment during EDGE has reflected the faculty team’s original plan to incorporate a variety of measures that evaluate students as individuals and as groups. These assessments include the aforementioned learning portfolio, with seven entries focused on the students’ most meaningful learning experiences; an individual

community volunteer experience and reflection; individual weekly reading quizzes; individual and group theme week assignments; small activity facilitation; a group Creative Inquiry research proposal; the aforementioned program plan; individual participation and attendance; and a three-part individual final exam (multiple choice, essay, and oral).

To ensure the flow of information is consistent when managing the EDGE program as a collaborative teaching environment, the faculty team and graduate student leaders hold a meeting each week. These meetings are organized and run by our EDGE coordinator, a necessary addition to the faculty team structure following the first year of the program. One of the most interesting and unlikely changes to our original vision for the immersion semester was the period of time each faculty member was assigned to work in EDGE team. Originally, we had planned a three-year rotation; however, as the team observed the program in action, we discovered two main problems with the rotation vision. First, if the three-year rotation was implemented, the original faculty team members, the designers of the program, would all leave the team at one time. Second, after two years of planning and tweaking the EDGE semester, the team discovered that there is ample time for research and other pursuits necessary for tenure-track faculty within the current operation of the EDGE program. In fact, the collaborative teaching model is better suited to align with the normal responsibilities of faculty such as professional meetings and research trips. Team members can plan their theme week obligations around their other professional responsibilities. Due to these issues, no one from the original team has cycled out. A new team member has been added because the program has grown to over 150 students and we still attempt to keep each PPG and trip group to 25 or less. We anticipate faculty rotation will occur in future semester, but we plan to introduce only one new person in at a time for consistency of the program.

Lessons Learned from PRTM EDGE

The current EDGE program is a product of input from students, other faculty, literature, programs at other institutions, and our own experience. Some aspects of our immersion vision have changed significantly; other aspects have changed very little. As a result, we have learned several lessons that have been pivotal in evolving our immersion experience to its current, successful form. This section shares some of these lessons for those wishing to re-think their own approach to curriculum delivery.

Lesson 1: The structure of an immersion program must break down content silos for students and faculty, which demands a rebuilding of the discipline in a holistic manner.

The first immersion semester we implemented had a separate syllabus for each of the four courses that made up the immersion semester, as well as the Creative Inquiry undergraduate research course. All of these had a separate electronic course system and grade book. However, our learning experiences were designed to integrate content that fit in more than one course. Keeping the courses separate became cumbersome for all involved (faculty and students). The learning portfolios had set entries for each course, assignments were designed for specific courses, and the final exam was parceled to reflect different course objectives. Grading within such a structure became cumbersome and

the format did not support the vision for integrated work. Understandably, students during that first semester often struggled with an integrated teaching model because they were evaluated in a traditional course style framework. In the second year of our program, we adapted some assignments, like the learning portfolio, so that students would receive one grade that would count in each class, but other assignments, quizzes and exams were still segmented by courses. For students they still had five courses to follow, along with each of their two groups and a master document for the entire PRTM Immersion program. We knew there was still some traditional structure that needed to go.

Our big change came in the third year of the program when we stopped using the four courses as anything but the organizing framework for faculty content and the method to register students. Students now get one master syllabus for PRTM EDGE and have one electronic grade book. The assignments became segmented into types (not courses), such as quizzes, theme week assignments, and the learning portfolio. These assignments contribute to one total EDGE grade that counts for all four courses. If a student receives an A in the EDGE program, he or she receives an A for each of the four courses that comprise the semester. The Creative Inquiry class remains separate for grading purposes and focuses on a research project that will last two years. These changes to the EDGE grading system enable students to think beyond the bounds of "courses" to consider the EDGE content as an integrated whole.

The take away lesson for us has been to shed as many of the traditional structures that inhibit the integration of material and the learning experience and that produce student anxiety and administrative paperwork. As a result, we are able to craft the semester's schedule based on the logical progression of topics, not based on the bounds of a traditional course structure. What information do students need prior to their three-day field trip? What topics should inform the theme weeks after the field trip? What is the best way to assess knowledge in those topics? By breaking down the silos between course content and course grading, we could consider such questions in a way that benefited the students and the material. Such an approach aligns well with Bigg's (1999) concept of student-focused teaching which considers what understanding is desired in students and what activities will achieve that understanding.

Lesson 2: Multiple evaluation approaches must be incorporated to address all learning styles, while remaining clear, honest, and authentic and mirroring real-life evaluation in a professional setting.

A diverse, clear, authentic assessment system has been a goal of our program since its inception. We still use many of the same assessment strategies we planned from the early stage of our vision such as quizzes, assignments, a learning portfolio, and group projects. In our third year, we added a performance evaluation of students from their faculty leader at the end of the semester. This performance evaluation mirrors an evaluation they may experience in a job setting and acts as an opportunity to meet one-on-one with a faculty mentor twice during the semester. Such an approach reflects the in-depth knowledge we as faculty gain of our students in such an immersive program. Further, faculty can have honest discussions with students as to their strengths and challenges for their academic experience and how these might be addressed in light of professional and life goals for each student.

The learning portfolio has provided the most significant learning in regards to assessment strategies. During the first year of the program students were given 18 highly structured entries to complete during the semester. The structured nature and the amount of entries created two issues. First, students' most meaningful learning usually was not related to the question posed in the structured entry. Feedback from the students at the end of the semester indicated that we might have missed much of their learning by over-structuring the entries. Second, the amount of entries created grading overload for faculty members, making it difficult to give meaningful feedback to students. During the second year, entries were more loosely guided and were reduced to seven. Still the guided entries seemed to force the content. Additionally, the guided entries did not match our intention for the learning portfolio to be a resource students carried with them throughout the semester to capture their most meaningful learning moments. To combat these issues, the current EDGE learning portfolio asks students to complete seven entries throughout the semester. In each entry, students respond to the same prompt: "What was your most meaningful learning experience during the past two weeks?" Students then connect their meaningful learning experience to their future as a PRTM professional and with course material. This learning portfolio structure seems to be more meaningful for the students because they are telling us what THEY are connecting with each week, rather than the reverse. This lesson has evolved beyond the learning portfolio assignment to inform an EDGE philosophy regarding the development of assignments—all assessments should capture students' learning and growth and should enable authentic feedback from faculty.

Lesson 3: Clear and regular forms of communication between the faculty, the instructors, and the students are a crucial mechanism for successful delivery of an immersion experience.

Particularly in the first year of the immersion program, the faculty and graduate student team devoted a lot of attention to the communication amongst ourselves, but we were somewhat less intentional with our communication with the students, relying heavily on verbal communication from faculty and graduate students. In many cases, students received mixed messages from multiple sources. Students in the first immersion semester were already unsure about being pioneers for a new model of learning, so they were in need of more communication, not less.

Now we have created multiple methods for two-way communication between the faculty team and the students. First, we leverage the intimacy of the two smaller groups (Trip and Program Planning Group) to provide students with the opportunity to discuss issues with their faculty mentors. Second, we introduced a weekly newsletter that is emailed to students at the end of each week. This newsletter contains the schedule for the upcoming two weeks, assignment due dates, general EDGE notices, and meeting locations. Third, we created a Student Advisory Board (SAB) for the EDGE program. Students volunteer to serve on the SAB and they are charged with sharing concerns of the students with the faculty team in regular meetings throughout the semester. The faculty team considers the concerns of the SAB seriously and makes adjustments during the semester based on their feedback. The final key component to effective communication is the time faculty members devote to developing relationships with the individual students. These relationships allow for open communication where students can have honest conversations about challenges and share excitement about

learning with faculty members. Such connections with faculty have continually surfaced as a highlight of the EDGE program from students on our semester evaluations.

Lesson 4: Having a program coordinator and support staff is key to the success of any immersion program.

We ran our first immersion semester as a committee with no appointed leader and no lead contact point for students. We quickly learned that this approach was not only cumbersome and frustrating within the faculty team, but also confusing for the students. Consequently, for our second immersion semester, we hired an EDGE coordinator. This coordinator position had a few important criteria: someone with a PhD to serve as a peer colleague for the rest of the faculty team, someone with the skills to manage the logistics of program delivery, but someone without the responsibilities of being on a tenure track. Further, in our case, this coordinator position is a 12-month, non-tenure track, lecturer appointment. The EDGE coordinator handles administrative tasks such as running our weekly meetings, conducting all email communication with students, coordinating the weekly newsletter, securing rooms for all EDGE classes, and entering all grades into the EDGE online gradebook. The addition of this coordinator has been the most crucial key to our success as a team. Coordinating an immersion semester is a full-time, year-round job, particularly with the tenure-track faculty team members having other pressures on their time. The coordinator holds the program together, allows for more consistent management of the program, and relieves the other faculty team members from spending additional time administering the program.

Lesson 5: A successful immersion semester balances the power of meaningful student choice with the need for the faculty team to stay true to the “big picture” philosophy of an immersion experience.

Part of the original vision of our immersion semester was making the experience nimble enough to solicit and respond to the student voice. We wanted to incorporate student choice and voice in the learning process as much as possible. Incorporating student choice and input encourages engagement in course material and combats student alienation from the learning process (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Mann, 2001). At times, particularly in the first year of EDGE, the faculty team was occasionally too reactive to student input, making quick, gut changes that were not fully developed before being introduced to students. These quick, reactive decisions were confusing for students and usually required multiple revisions that further confused the students. As Blumenfeld, Puro, and Mergendoller (1992) argued, instructors must provide facilitative support to increase student engagement and decrease frustration. Over time, we have learned to balance the importance of student choice and input with the reality that the faculty team possesses the “big picture” of EDGE that the students do not always possess. As a result, we now incorporate student choice and input in a more intentional manner, with the faculty always acting as guiding facilitators throughout the process to decide what to incorporate and what not to incorporate and always being transparent with students about the reasons for our decisions.

One example of this lesson is the evolution of the operation of Creative Inquiry within the EDGE semester. In our first semester we had three issues that arose from the Creative Inquiry experience. The first issue concerned the creation of the Creative Inquiry research teams. Our plan was to create the research teams randomly after

students returned from their three-day EDGE field trip. The students, however, felt that the group bonding they experienced on the field trips would make them more successful as research teams and were disappointed to learn they would work with a new, random group of students for Creative Inquiry. The second issue in the first year of Creative Inquiry was that we allowed each student research team to choose their own research topics. We quickly learned that undergraduate students typically do not naturally gravitate toward research topics; they gravitate toward tangible, practitioner projects. We ended up with projects that actually had little to do with research such as planting endangered native flowers on a trail, building picnic shelters, campsites, hosting an event for a day and building an outdoor classroom. On one hand, we did not incorporate student input enough in the first year of Creative Inquiry with the group formation. On the other hand we saw the negative consequences of over-incorporating student choice without faculty guidance toward the “big picture.”

Currently in the EDGE Creative Inquiry program, we do a better job of striking the student choice-faculty guidance balance. The students now sign up for their choice of Creative Inquiry research project during the first week of EDGE. The faculty leader of each Creative Inquiry project writes a description for a general research topic that he or she feels skilled at advising. Students indicate their preferred projects and are assigned one of their top three requests. Each Creative Inquiry research team travels together on the three-day EDGE field trip, providing the group bonding the first-year students craved. After the trip, each research team meets to develop a specific research project within the faculty leader’s original general topic. This balance between incorporating student input and choice and faculty guidance is a core feature of the current EDGE program. Such balance allows students to feel both empowered and supported and ensures that the ultimate EDGE ‘big picture’ philosophy is achieved at the end of the semester.

Future Directions and Conclusions

As indicated throughout this article, an immersive approach to curriculum delivery requires constant evolution. We will never be “finished” designing the EDGE program. Our plan for the future of EDGE is to continue to make better each aspect of the teaching and learning to make the program more effective. We aim to conduct research to document the mechanisms and outcomes at work in EDGE. Such data will allow us to further tweak the program. To break down the content silos even further, we will be replacing the four PRTM EDGE courses with two courses, a 5-credit and a 6-credit course covering the organization, implementation, and evaluation of PRTM. We have also just recently received approval for moving the core content sequence earlier in students’ careers. Beginning with fall 2013, students will take part in EDGE during the first semester of their sophomore year. This move will give more time for emphasis areas to work with students after the EDGE program, and possibly develop emphasis-specific immersion programs of their own.

The first two years of the immersion semester were time consuming for the faculty team as we tried to get a handle on the new delivery approach. Over time, however, the structure of EDGE has evolved in a way that has freed time up for our research projects, our graduate students, and our other faculty responsibilities. We think this development is a key reason why none of the team from the first immersion program

wants to “cycle out.” We are finally reaping the benefits of our design, finally seeing our vision come to fruition, and finally beginning to have more time for research which ultimately makes our teaching more effective. We have created a structure that builds relationships and fosters learning and caring among our students and ourselves. Consequently, university teaching for us has become authentic in a way articulated well by Albert North Whitehead (1929) when he promoted “intimate education,” built on the kind of caring for the whole person that makes up a student and built on the concept of learning as a relationship where all parties are responsible for a successful outcome.

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