Chapter 3

Experiential and community-engaged learning: Improving the health of Cape Breton Island, one fourth grader at a time

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Chapter Summary

This case study documents experiential learning opportunities for students and faculty from Sport and Human Kinetics (SPHK) courses at Cape Breton University (CBU). We explore ways in which learning opportunities created an impact on student learning and leadership. Students created sessions for a university led, community engagement program called ‘Youth in Motion’ (YiM). The program involves grade four students from every school on Cape Breton Island engaging in a half-day of physical activities. The university students were responsible for conducting thirty-minute sessions with each school group five times over the course of the half-day. First year course programming was more faculty structured, while third year programming was more student directed. Four students from each class, a fourth-year undergraduate teaching assistant, and the two professors involved in YiM were interviewed after the completion of the courses. Interviews were on average 15-30 minutes long and asked a series of questions that delved into the learning experiences of students and faculty involved in this initiative. Students were impacted by their YiM experiences in ways that influenced their understanding and leadership of developing fundamental movement skills and outdoor programming. Further, they learned unexpected lessons about communication, patience, and they noted that learning is fun! The professors noted that they could push the students’ learning further than they would in traditional pedagogies and that it was fun for them to be involved in too. There were also several stakeholder benefits. This case study has value for academic and non-academic audiences. Firstly, it provides examples of ways in which students benefit from community-engaged and experiential learning situations. It provides a model for how these experiences can be jointly organized by university faculty members, community organizations, and the university. Further, for non-academic audiences interested in healthy leisure opportunities for children, this chapter illustrates how programs organized by trained and educated young adults may promote fun and motivating, physically active, and outdoor-friendly activities.

Learning Objectives

This case study has value for academic and non-academic audiences. For academics:

- It provides examples of ways in which students benefit from community-engaged and experiential learning situations.
- It provides a model for how these experiences can be jointly organized by university faculty members, community organizations, and the university as a whole.

For non-academic audiences:

- It provides an understanding of how opportunities for children, run by trained and educated young adults, may promote fun and motivating, physically active, and outdoor-friendly leisure activities.
The Issue, Opportunity or Trend

The Canadian Sport for Life movement aims to improve the quality of experiences in sport and physical activity for all Canadians (CS4L, 2013). One of its key objectives is to increase physical literacy in youth so that children have the competence and confidence to enjoy participating in various physical activities. Diminishing physical literacy is a problem that is affecting people all over the world. In Canada, rates of obese and overweight children have almost doubled in one generation alone (PHAC, 2012). Total screen time of youth aged 10-16 is close to eight hours per day instead of the recommended 2-hour guideline (Wilson, 2012). Developing children’s physical literacy is an important objective in helping them make healthy leisure time decisions.

As such, the CS4L movement has adopted the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model that has two main objectives: 1) to enhance competitive performance of top athletes by promoting athletic development throughout childhood and adolescence, and 2) to slow the rate of decline in people’s physical activity levels (Ifedi, 2005). For both these objectives, children’s physical development starts in the same way by being active from the outset (0-6 years old), and learning fundamentals of movement thereafter (6-9 years old) (Canadian Sport Centres, 2006). These two stages of development are generic and not sport specific, although the stages of development that ensue have been tailored to various sports based on their needs. The Canadian National Coaching Certification Program provides coaching education workshops, courses, and certification that are designed to give coaches knowledge to follow the LTAD model (Banack, Bloom, & Falcao, 2012). One of these workshops is in helping community leaders learn to teach Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) to youth in a games-oriented, non-sport specific context (Coaching Association of Canada, 2015). Research has shown that coaches have adopted the LTAD model into their training with varied results. Coaches who emphasized the model was used as a guide (not a strict set of rules) had an easier time understanding how it related to lifelong involvement in sport (Beaudoin, Callary, & Trudeau, 2015). Others found the model incompatible with some rules and norms of their sport, such as swimming’s efforts to specialize at a young age versus the LTAD model’s non sport specific stages lasting until the child is nine years old (Lang & Light, 2010). Little research has been conducted on how the LTAD model is being used by coaches or community leaders who are not in sport specific contexts, such as those individuals teaching children physical literacy and FMS through leisure activities.

The recent Canadian Parks Council (2014) report outlined the dilemma of screen time versus green time (outdoor play), whereby more and more Canadian children do not play outside, they do not walk to school, and they are unaware of the natural history in the area they live; largely because parents and educators are taking it out of their curriculum. Increasingly many youth have health issues related to this (see Participaction, 2015). As such, it is important that we have educated leaders who understand how to develop children’s competence and confidence in physical activity, and also how to motivate children to be active and enjoy the outdoors. Community-engagement and experiential learning are relatively new trends in the pedagogy of higher education, and they are avenues that can be used to help students develop a deeper connection to important societal leisure issues, such as interest and motivation in physical activities, networks with organizations, and the significance of spending time outdoors. It is these methods that we detail further in this case study, and they are critical to the innovation itself.
The Innovation

Case Context

This case study documents a specific experiential learning opportunity for students and faculty from within Sport and Human Kinetics (SPHK) courses at Cape Breton University (CBU) in Nova Scotia, Canada. We explored ways in which a community-engaged experience and associated assignments created an impact on student learning and leadership. Sixty-five students in three courses (one first year course that was repeated in both fall and winter semesters, and one third year course) created sessions for ‘Youth in Motion’ (YiM) focusing on FMS and outdoor adventure programming. YiM is an initiative between CBU, the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board (CBVRSB), the Cape Breton Health and Recreation Complex (CBHRC), and the Nova Scotia provincial government Department of Health and Wellness. YiM involves roughly 800 grade four students, from every elementary school on Cape Breton Island, engaging in a half-day of physical activities. Every Friday morning from October until March (except holidays and PD days), children from five different schools arrived at the CBHRC ‘Dome’ facility on the CBU campus, and ran through a series of five half-hour physical activity sessions. As part of their SPHK courses, the university students were responsible for conducting thirty-minute sessions with each school group; run five times during a single Friday morning.

In 2014-2015, YiM completed its eighth year of “day camp” style, active healthy living experiences for youth. The program involves traditional sports, often run by the appropriate local club or varsity team at CBU as well as activities that youth may not have the opportunity to be exposed to within their physical education classes offered in schools, such as the FMS and outdoor adventure programming sessions put on by the students in this particular case study.

Stakeholders Involved

Youth in Motion is managed by an individual working in CBU’s Office of the President. This is a priority community initiative for the university as YiM fits with the University’s interests to:

Promise and deliver an exceptional educational experience for students. Our faculty, students and graduates are recognized nationally and internationally for innovative accomplishments from academic excellence to athletic prowess. These successes contribute to Cape Breton University’s growing reputation for excellence both in and out of the classroom. (CBU, 2015)

Currently, Shauna Kelly (from the Office of the President) coordinates the stakeholders involved in the delivery of the program, including the sponsors and volunteers. The program relies on volunteers from organizations, such as Lingan Golf and Country Club, Island Martial Arts, Boardmore Theatre, Soccer Cape Breton, and CBU varsity athletics. Further, the program is sponsored in part by the CBVRSB who pays for bussing the children to the Dome. The CBHRC itself provides the Dome facility for the program, CBU provides other on campus space, and the provincial government (Department of Health and Wellness) provided facilitator training in Fundamental Movement Skills. The Community Studies department (which houses SPHK courses at CBU) also funded a fourth year student Teaching Assistant to help coordinate on Friday mornings.

Shauna and the manager of the Dome, Yann Arthur, were instrumental in working together with Bettina and Pat (the professors involved in the courses). In an interview, Bettina said:

I was approached by Shauna three years ago because she was lacking volunteers to do some of the activities for YiM. So I thought that maybe this was a neat initiative to have my class involved in. They could be volunteers while completing an assignment. I thought it was a good learning opportunity for them and something that gets them in touch with the community. She liked that idea. I’ve done it for two years now. We had to re-organize a bit - YiM use to be held on a
Thursday, we changed the date to Friday to accommodate the students’ schedules as it was a more flexible day for them. So Shauna checked with the School board and changed the date for Fridays. We also had to check with the Dome because Yann had various different programs on Friday mornings, but he could re-organize that too. It was a bit complicated trying to get that organized to fit with the students’ schedules but it all worked out nicely... In the second year of my involvement one of the sponsors pulled out in the summer because they had not received the feedback they requested the previous year. I am not sure if we carried on without the funding or if, in the end, Shauna provided the feedback, I think that is what happened, and then we were able to get that funding back again. Those are some issues that I didn’t have to deal with directly but it impacted whether or not I was going to have this as an assignment in my course. Then I invited Pat’s class to come on last year to build on the success and have the students provide outdoor activities.

Pat said:
I didn’t know too much about YiM and I was a little bit worried about where it might go at the beginning, but that was remedied pretty quickly. It rolled smoothly. Everything with the Dome and the set up and the kids getting there [by bus through the School Board], all of that was easy. Shauna was great. She came into my class and explained the history of the program. The students really got into it because it was not like any of their other classes; they got to do something that connected them to the community, which was of real value. The students ate it up... Shauna is the gate keeper of YiM at CBU. She figures out the logistical pieces and the budget. She has the contacts and the connections. She did all the scheduling, she deals with the school board. She is critical! Yann was just always there, on every single Friday and he would help with equipment needs. I would have chats with him about how it is going and whether the busses were late, but to be honest once it was running I didn’t have much interaction with the set up of the program. It is all well set up. It was just the nature of my course and the assignment that I had control of. It was running with what the students chose to do.

While Pat found it relatively easy to organize, Bettina noted that there were some challenges in facilitating her course in terms of organizing across student activities, course delivery, and School board cancellations.

The assignment is no doubt a success. However, it really has taken a lot of effort on my part to ensure, from the beginning, that I had properly organized the dates and made sure they fit with my course content delivery. I worried how students would react to being asked to attend the YiM on a Friday, when this is not their normal class time. I had to make sure that we had all the equipment that was needed to ensure students had what they needed for their sessions. I needed to reorganize when classes were cancelled due to bad weather.

**Approach Used and the Impact**

Students in the first year course, entitled Sport and Physical Activity Practice, were trained in Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) in a workshop delivered by Bettina, the professor of the course and also a facilitator for the National Coaching Certification Program. Following training, groups of four or five students developed a plan to deliver one YiM session per group, focusing on helping children learn a specific FMS through games. Each group then practiced their session with their peers and debriefed with the class. They then presented their session during a Friday YiM morning a total of five times so that each school group had the chance to participate in their session. Finally, they each submitted an individual reflection based on their plan, peer-practice, YiM date, and class materials.

Students in the third-year course, entitled Adventure Programming, planned for and delivered two separate YiM sessions in which they led students through an outdoor scavenger hunt. Pat, the professor in the third year course, allowed students as a
whole class to design the sessions choosing the activity in a self-directed manner, writing the plan, and organizing contingencies for weather, etc., determining the equipment needs and prizes, and reflecting on the process throughout. They implemented the sessions in smaller groups that changed week-to-week. Student involvement in YiM is a progression. First year programming is more faculty structured with FMS training built in, while third year programming is more student self (group) directed. In the third year course the assumption is that they will, in the future, have taken the first year course along with a suite of second year courses that do not interact with YiM. However, at present this is not always the case. The instructor must gauge the group’s ability and offer expertise in the planning and implementation phases as required.

Four students from each class, a fourth-year undergraduate teaching assistant, as well as the two professors involved in YiM were interviewed after the completion of the courses. A small focus group was also held with other partners as related to the 3rd year class. Interviews were on average 15-30 minutes long and asked a series of questions that delved into the learning experiences of students and faculty involved in this initiative. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all student quotes in this article.

Many students in the first year course, while aware of the growing pandemic of obesity, were unaware of how youth’s understanding of physical literacy could help them develop an interest and confidence in being physically active, thus acting as a preventative measure to obesity. Students were also generally unaware that youth were not necessarily learning fundamental movement skills in physical education classes and that they could make an impact on the grade four youth through their YiM session. Bettina said:

Students are not aware that kids don’t necessarily learn how to properly throw or properly run in gym class. I can tell them that in a classroom situation, but when they are asking the kids to show them how to jump properly and they are seeing for themselves that the kids don’t know how to do it properly, then the students become really aware of what I was saying in the class. For them to be able to learn that through the experience they are having with the kids is so much more impactful and they learn that they can actually make an impact on those kids too and that they can feel confident in what it is they are doing.

One first-year student, Keith, voiced this same issue:

At the end of each session we would ask “do you guys work on this in school?” and they would say, “no, we’ve never heard of this”. So I thought that was really surprising, and I realized that these are important aspects that should touched on in school. I feel like they were kind of missing out. There were kids that were fortunate to be involved in extra-curricular activities that do have a step up but those less fortunate are not getting that. The fundamental movement skills themselves are kind of overlooked and should be properly taught at young age, therefore they are carrying bad habits when they get older.

Another first-year student, Kristine, said:

It was nice to work with the schools because they don’t get a lot of time in class to achieve their objectives so it was nice to give them an opportunity to learn and we were learning as well so it was a good partnership, it was win-win.

Many students also had never had the opportunity to apply directly what they learned as part of a course to a community-engaged initiative. First-year student, Brian, said:
We were able to implement our session. It wasn’t just come up with the session and “yay that’s great”. We had to teach someone to do it. That really helped with learning - being able to follow through with everything. It was not just everything in writing, it was physically happening.

All of the 3rd year students concurred, including Kim, who said:

It was nice to do hands-on stuff, working with people, as opposed to just learning about working with people. A lot of time in courses they teach you all these things but they never really give you the chance to actually try to do something. This was in-depth learning: we had to think about it from our own perspective, decide what it is we were doing, how we were doing it, and who we were doing it with. Kids can be all over the map and I really had to think in the moment about everything that I learned in the classroom. We learned a lot from that. It was probably one of the most fun things I’ve done since I started at CBU.

Students also learned leadership skills that permeate throughout the program structure. Michael said,

We had to work with other students that we did not necessarily know. We had to come together and agree on what we believed would be best for the children to learn. That definitely developed my leadership skills. Then we had to implement the actual session. I really saw my group members come out, direct, and help the children. I didn’t see that before. It was really surprising to see how we came together, stepped forward and made this positive motion and I feel that everyone really developed some sort of leadership quality.

Bettina added:

Once they have the experience, they understand that they can actually take on leadership roles in different ways. So even if they are not the person who is in front of the kids giving instruction, they can still take on leadership roles by helping the autistic child, or being a role model for the kids in the games so that the kids feel more enthusiastic and involved. There are various types of leadership roles. And I think that they see that through this experience and that they come away with a better understanding of who they are as leaders and how they can facilitate groups.

The fourth-year student TA, Jason, noted: “I really enjoyed the fact that there didn’t seem to be one leader within a group. All the students were leaders, they all had something to do, they all worked really well as a group. “Our approach allowed students in the first year course to be directed in their endeavours, and allowed students in the third year course to be more self-directed based on what they had previously learned in the first year course. First year students, Kristine and Michael explained: “this was really guided. It laid out exactly what we had to do but we still had freedom, it was good.”

The entire course was leading towards this goal of how to apply physical literacy as well as some other concepts to the community, and more specifically, youth. So having the theory behind this and then being able to apply it in an actual situation was very, very, helpful. Third year students spoke of the self-directedness of their assignment, they enjoyed the “free reign” on activity planning, but of course learned what small items would need to be changed in the future.

Implications and Lessons learned

As described in the section above, students learned the leadership of developing fundamental movement skills and outdoor adventure programming. In terms of the stakeholder benefits, the school children learned physical literacy and outdoor skills, while also just enjoying themselves. One student, Keith, mentioned: “You guys are making that connection with the school systems, which is really good. It was really appreciated by the (school board) teachers, we got a lot of positive feedback from them and that was really rewarding.” Further, CBU’s Office of the President had enough volunteers to run the program
because our involvement. Finally, Dean Morley, Community Sport Development Coordinator for the Cape Breton region within the provincial Department of Health and Wellness, identified the assignment as a leading example for provincial universities for training university students in FMS and connecting them with the community and school board. He said “this is without doubt one of the most exciting and excellent initiatives that I’ve seen” (personal communication, 24/07/13).

While the YiM experiences undoubtedly had positive impacts on the students in the courses, the faculty noted that these activities involve much planning and managing of groups, and can be fraught with difficulties in getting everyone on board with the program. From a faculty perspective, we (both professors) started to plan the assignments and courses in conjunction with Shauna during the summer months to provide dates to the school board that aligned with our courses, and then had to re-organize these dates once we found out about planned holidays or teacher professional development dates that conflicted with the dates we had proposed. Bettina had to book space in the dome for training students and collaborate with Yann Arthur, the manager, to bring in equipment and store it in a secure location within the facility. Pat had to check the outdoor space around the dome (including the wilderness trails system behind the dome). Most importantly, Pat needed to make sure that the back up plan created by the students in the event of inclement weather would work within the dome. Finally, the YiM sessions occurred outside of class time and so both professors had to check that their students were indeed attending the YiM sessions and answer student questions before the sessions started. Some of these last issues were resolved by hiring a fourth year student who acted as a Teaching Assistant for both courses.

Despite the difficulties to delivering community-engaged and experiential learning opportunities, we noted lessons that were learned beyond our course objectives; for example, students could apply what was learned to their job aspirations. Kristine said, “I’d like to work in a community center, working with youth and doing programs like employment programs and working in day camps. That’s kind of where I see myself.” Keith noted, “My plans next are to apply to med school. The communication and leadership aspects from this course will help me speak up in med school interviews. And just being part of a team and a group working together with people is a step in the right direction.” Michael also added, “I definitely think that this experience helped me realize that I want to be involved with the community and help out with physical literacy especially with the youth. That is what I am leaning towards doing in the summer.”

Further, beyond the course material, students spoke of learning unexpected lessons. One student said, “In our session we had an autistic girl. During introductions she got very scared and left for a few minutes. When she came back, I sat down in front of her and introduced myself... The only examples of autistic children I have seen have been children who are unable to interact fairly normally with others... I learned that there are varying degrees to autism and that you can’t always tell when someone has it.

Another student, Kristine said, “I was kind of scared because I was in a group with all international students. I was finding it really hard to understand one student but throughout working with them I actually got better at it, the language barrier kind of came down because he could show me. It was just easier to communicate because it wasn’t just words, it was movement.”

Bettina also noted, “Beyond learning the course content, quite a few of them learned that learning can be really fun at the university level. It does not have to be dry and boring memorization. It can be about experiencing things they never thought they would experience. If I can open up students’ understanding of learning in that way then to me that is really powerful.”
Kim, said,

The course showed me that learning can actually be fun and that you can enjoy what it is that you are learning. I had a lot of fun, especially going to the dome, it was really refreshing as opposed to just sitting in a classroom all day.

Pat explained,

It is probably the course I had the most fun with since I joined CBU. These guys were teaching grade fours how to do outdoor stuff and that’s pretty positive. We are watching kids get good self-esteem and enjoy themselves on a Friday morning, getting out of the classroom and going away with smiles. It is just all around a positive community involvement package. So for me it was a really nice, really fun course and student population. And I had a wide variety of different CBU students so for me it is neat to see. Teaching in this manner is valuable because I’m guessing some of these students don’t do well in the traditional academic realm but they are the high functioners in my particular course. So if I had chosen to just lecture info at them and give them a test on adventure programming and outdoor education they would have come out with a 55 and now they come out with a 90. They probably learned more in this type of class than if I had spit information at them.

Both professors also learned lessons through the experience. Bettina said,

I have only been a professor for three years and I have been doing this for two years. So much of it for me has been figuring out that: a) I am not somebody who really likes to lecture; and b) I really do enjoy having students engage with the community and these opportunities for them to learn in experiential ways. The community studies program at CBU was attractive to me because I really loved the idea of experiential and community-engaged learning. I didn’t have a clear understanding of how I could use that pedagogy in the sport and human kinetics courses. I was a student of a large university where it was very much lecture-based, written paper assignments, and multiple choice exams, and so being involved in this endeavour has really allowed me see how I can change that format and make it much more experiential and community based. I am continuing to try to evolve that understanding. This first year course is still quite directed in terms of what I am asking the students to do and how I am walking them through step-by-step what they are doing. Perhaps those students need to have that direction but as they are gaining skills in that area then what can I do? In learning about the delivery of the third year course, the students were self-directed in what they were trying to do within that course. I started to reflect on how else I can open student learning to make it more about them choosing what they are doing, how they are going to learn but still respecting the content and objectives of the course.

Pat said,

Being new at CBU I’m still figuring out how I can push a segment of our students a lot further than they might have been pushed before. Now I feel that I could ask a lot more of them in terms of both the functional logistical stuff, like asking them to possibly facilitate a third week [of programming as the 3rd year course asked each student group to lead two weeks] and asking them to go deeper in some of their reflection... Next year, I will give them the same degree of freedom but based on this year I feel like right up front we want to plan the primary activity plus the snow day activity, plus the rain day activity. So in future years when I ask them for a program plan I’m actually looking for three whole program plans.

In relation to the implications of such assignments, both professors felt that student motivation was high, which made it worthwhile. Bettina noted:
Is it worth it? YES! The students take so much from it! You can see that they are excited to come to class, they listen and actively take part in the classes, they don’t seem to mind at all that I am asking them to do extra work in terms of coming in on a Friday, they are happy and motivated to learn, they ask me additional questions, and who knows, maybe they are inspired to pursue work in this area!

Pat added:
I asked the students to spend an extra three hours on a Friday outside of their class time on a day when most of them don’t even have classes and most of the feedback was “I love this, this is the greatest thing ever. You could have made me run three or four weeks of sessions”. I gave them two weeks per student thinking that was on the high end of things but they said “no way, we loved coming to school to work on this”.

Students in Pat’s class – who were mainly at the end of their university career – mentioned that every course should engage students like this; all CBU classes ought to give back to the community. One student, Michael, noted:

One of the biggest things that universities should try to implement in any program is to have theoretical knowledge of the program as well as applied knowledge. With the YiM, you are physically doing what you have learned. I think that more programs should incorporate something like this. The YiM program is not a controlled environment so you don’t know what to expect. I think having this kind of environment helps with the course because it puts into perspective what the goal is and you learn more from it. And then having a reflective assessment after combines all your knowledge and let’s you reflect on what you have done and then you can say this is what you’ve improved on.

The implications of learning in this way are clear: it is in-depth, fun, motivating, and students learn beyond course content. Faculty can also use this experience to learn and reflect on their practices. Finally, the community can benefit too.

**Discussion Questions**

1. As a student, how might an experience such as working with Youth In Motion shape your job aspirations? How might a student be able to use the ‘intangible’ learning opportunities in their next job? Think of specific content areas, but also skills such as communication, group work, planning, and reflection.

2. If you were a student working with this program, what issues or challenges might arise that you were not expecting? How might you learn from that?

3. As a student, when you create a program such as this, what is your “Plan B” or C/D/E? For inclement weather, apathetic students, unprepared students, etc. Why is it important to plan these alternative scenarios?

4. As a faculty member, if this type of large-scale, community-engaged project is not within the realm of possibility for your class, what “paired down” ideas might work in your context?

5. For all stakeholders, what is the benefit of these type of large, multi-stakeholder initiatives to placing societal value on leisure?
References


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