

# EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING INTEGRATION IN PRE-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS CONDUCTED ABROAD

In *Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine*, students have the opportunity to add an international internship to their training, and this can give them the chance to get started on the Comprehensive Assessment for their program. For teachers, this internship opens up new possibilities for extending learning while at the same time offering their students a stimulating and practical experience. And the results are conclusive. For the cohort of 2008-2009 graduates, more than half of the students in pre-university programs were able to take advantage of this opportunity.

The *Centre d'études collégiales des Îles (CECI)* in *Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine* is one of four units that make up *Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles*. Although it is isolated in the middle of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, our study centre is very well connected to the “mainland” and to the rest of the world. Indeed, our young people, like those in many other areas, have been bitten by the travel bug.

Following a number of trips organized in an informal way by our centre, the program *Amarres et Voilures* was established in the autumn of 2005. It is supported by many partners and coordinated in *Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine* by the *CECI* and the *Carrefour jeunesse-emploi*. Its principal mission is to promote “the raising of civic consciousness, an openness to the world and involvement in one’s own milieu” (*Amarres et Voilures*, 2005). This partnership makes it possible, for example, to hire a human resources person who organizes and brings together most of the *CECI* “travel” activities via a common portal.

One of the aspects of this program involves internships in international cooperation and it is open both to students from our centre and to other islanders between 18 and 35 years of age. A group of interns normally consists of around fifteen participants and at least two chaperones. Here is how, in December 2005, the first four-week internship in the *Coopesilencio* community of Costa Rica was born. The internship relied on a funding campaign that included support from *l'Office Québec-Amériques pour la jeunesse (OQAJ)* and the sale of fair trade products. It took place in partnership with the *Cooprena* organization of Costa Rica. The latter facilitated links with the community, welcomed interns and

provided them with transportation at the beginning and at the end of the internship.

The interns and their chaperones stayed with families in the community. The latter functions in a cooperative manner, something that is also very characteristic of our *communauté madelinienne*. The interns were assigned various tasks by the host community, such as clearing paths, feeding and cleaning at the wildlife rehabilitation centre, etc. Midway through and again at the end of the internship, ecotourism activities took place over two to three days to allow students to visit land and marine parks as well as a fair trade coffee plantation.

## WHERE DID THE IDEA FOR THE PROGRAM COMPREHENSIVE ACTIVITY IN COSTA RICA COME FROM?

Soon after returning from the first internship in *Coopesilencio*, on the initiative of *Amarres et Voilures*, the Natural Science program people were asked to do the pedagogical organization for another project. The basic idea for this one was to create closer ties with the Costa Rican community in order to offer them *madelinienne* expertise as a way to contribute to the resolution of important and real problems having to do with Natural Science.

Two students from the first internship volunteered and as a result they left again in December 2006. They spent three months in *Coopesilencio* in order to get a more precise picture of the situation and the contribution that students could make towards solving the problems facing this community. At the end of the project, a biology teacher went there to assess the situation thanks to a contribution from the organization *Cégep international*. From that moment we had a better understanding and we were better able to structure our future activities in this community.

It was then possible for a pedagogical project to begin in 2007-2008 through the intervention of a group in December and January. The objectives were to train young students and other interested participants beforehand for this internship project in Costa Rica and to help them get off on the right foot. The goal for the project? To enable the community to do composting, in terms of both the infrastructure required (the site) and awareness and knowledge related to its use (the process). An external resource person, who was trained in these matters and recruited for this purpose, accompanied the group thanks to the *Programme pour l'internationalisation de l'éducation québécoise (PIEQ)*, a program administered by *Cégep international*. In this way we encouraged the transfer of expertise among the students, and later with the host community, in order to allow this project in Costa Rica to continue over a longer term. That was the beginning of an adventure that would grow over time.



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## ▶ FORMAT OF THE COMPREHENSIVE ACTIVITY AT CECI IN TWO NATURAL SCIENCE PROGRAMS

### IN NATURAL SCIENCE

This is how, during this first pedagogical internship in Costa Rica, four students went about setting up the first composting units in the *La Huerta* community gardens thereby completing the first stages of their Comprehensive Activity. This is also what allowed the work to continue in 2008-2009<sup>1</sup> with the participation of a biology teacher who accompanied a new group for part of the internship. In this way, four other students completed the experimental part of their Comprehensive Activity in Costa Rica. We took advantage of this opportunity to optimize the composting methods and to introduce some organic gardening methods. The work was made easier by the fact that the people in charge of the *Coopesilencio* community gardens had pursued the composting activities implemented the year before and had declared that they were very motivated by this new process. Their methods however, were not yet up to par at this stage of the project.

*[...] the interns were required to report to the college community [...] on their project and therefore on the bridges that they made between the knowledge [...] acquired abroad and the knowledge at the core of the Social Science program [...].*

The research hypothesis underlying this pedagogical internship presupposed that the compost produced using techniques recognized in scientific circles (namely by being based on the proper ratio of the various types of residue) and using materials that were available for free on site, would be of a better physicochemical quality and would mature more quickly than the compost that had been produced up to that point by the community. This hypothesis was validated by the results of an analysis done several weeks later, in March 2009, when another group of interns from *Amarres et Voilures* was in *Coopesilencio*. What is more, the community had already started to use this mature compost. It was a nice step forward for our hosts because the people in charge of the garden did not believe, initially, that we could make compost that is entirely

<sup>1</sup> This same year, another team of students started the research part of a project dealing with biofuel products, thanks to the palm oil trees and a biodigester on site.

natural. They were still spending a lot of money on various materials to add to their own compost.

Whether or not it includes an international dimension, the Comprehensive Activity in Natural Science is based on the following ministry competency: to deal with one or more subjects within a Natural Science framework on the basis of acquired knowledge (*MELS*, 1998, p. 74). The Comprehensive Activity is part of a course consisting of three periods a week. It focuses on the completion of an experiment, a comprehensive report in the form of a scientific article and an oral presentation on a given subject. There are two profiles: one in Pure and Applied Science and the other in Health Science. The templates for the project are drawn up by the teachers; then a bank of subjects is suggested to the students based on interests they have shown beforehand. Each of the projects allows for making connections between at least two disciplines and contains suggestions for experiments, as well as how to approach the projects. The work is done in teams of three to five students and the composition of the teams, previously discussed within the department, is imposed. These steps are normally taken at the beginning of the winter session. The teacher in charge of the course is assisted, from the beginning to the end of the project, by a teacher associated with the student's profile. This is sometimes offset by a departmental exemption. The final evaluation for this course is the Comprehensive Assessment and an evaluation committee, which includes all the teachers in the program, is invited to the oral presentation.

For now, the addition of an international dimension to the Comprehensive Activity has only affected the Health Science profile in which ten students (four in 2007-2008 and six in 2008-2009) have been able to benefit from this approach. In general, the addition of this international dimension requires planning with all the parties involved (*Amarres et Voilures*, concerned teachers and students) starting in the fall. The composition of the teams to be working in Costa Rica is a function of the students actually registered for the internship and of consultation with these student interns. A variety of training and preparation activities takes place before the internship, at which time a work plan for the activities to be carried out in Costa Rica is established. Involvement in this activity within the framework of the winter term Comprehensive Activity is conditional on the completion of the work plan and on the students' decisions to follow through with the project.





We make sure to take into account the various ministry components of the competency and to meet its performance criteria in the same way that we do within the framework of the conventional Comprehensive Activity. Among these, the component requiring that a student establish links between science, technology and the evolution of society is particularly well-covered in Costa Rica because there it is possible to directly compare these dimensions in a society that differs from ours in many respects.

The following table lists the main activities to be carried out in a typical Comprehensive Activity. It does not cover all the other activities carried out by *Amarres et Voilures* in preparing for an actual internship, such as an introduction to the host community and to international cooperation.

**TABLE 1: MAJOR ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT IN THE FRAMEWORK OF AN INTERNATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE ACTIVITY FOR TWO PRE-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS IN 2008-2009**

NATURAL SCIENCE	SOCIAL SCIENCE
<p><i>Prior to Departure</i></p> <p>Planning that involves <i>Amarres et Voilures</i>, the person in charge of the program and the teacher in charge of the Comprehensive Activity; a meeting of the participants conducted by the teacher in charge; presentation of the process and training of the team; learning the Spanish language.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Training in organic composting and agriculture given by a resource person and preparatory reading by students.</li> <li>- Establishment of a work plan by the teacher in charge; presentation and discussion with parties involved.</li> <li>- Purchasing, preparing and training with the materials required (physicochemical kits, composting thermometer, etc.) and obtaining the required customs documents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Selecting the Social Science themes that will be included in the Internet website.</li> <li>- Participating in meetings with resource people on the cooperative system and globalization as well as fair trade.</li> <li>- Organizing and carrying out the funding campaign.</li> <li>- Preparing the required materials (camera, recorder).</li> </ul>
<p><i>In Coopesilencio</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Observing how far the host community has come and consulting officials to lay the foundation of the project, its location, its methods, its usefulness.</li> <li>- Collecting the types of organic materials required and available for making a compost heap.</li> <li>- Making the compost heap according to recognized scientific standards.</li> <li>- Installing a mini weather station near the site.</li> <li>- Maintaining the compost heap and taking daily physicochemical readings (height, temperature of the heap, humidity, mixing, etc.).</li> <li>- Comparing these data with those of compost heaps already set up by the community.</li> <li>- Doing tests of the soil and the presence of macro-organisms in the garden and in the mature compost heaps.</li> <li>- Comparing the data having to do with soil that has been modified by chemical and organic fertilizers.</li> <li>- Making a plan of the garden and comparing it to previous plans in order to discuss crop rotation with the community.</li> <li>- Translating the basic information into Spanish to ensure that activities continue after we leave.</li> </ul>	<p><i>In Coopesilencio</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Observing the lifestyle, rituals, customs and general community organization.</li> <li>- Holding meetings with key people taking into account the themes to be addressed.</li> <li>- Compiling the information in writing or with the help of available material.</li> </ul>
<p><i>After the trip</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Compiling and analyzing the data collected when performing carbon-nitrogen ratio calculations based on established calculation formulas.</li> <li>- Continuing data collection.</li> <li>- Linking up with the municipality of <i>Les Îles</i> in order to compare types of composting.</li> <li>- Analyzing in more detail the information dealing with rotating crops.</li> <li>- Writing the comprehensive report.</li> <li>- Preparing and giving an oral presentation with the other teams.</li> </ul>	<p><i>After the trip</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyzing and sorting the transcripts and recordings of interviews conducted.</li> <li>- Selecting and compiling data (dealing with Social Science but also those of Natural Science) that will be put on the Internet website.</li> <li>- Doing documentary research in more depth.</li> <li>- Selecting photos and identifying them.</li> <li>- Making contacts for setting up the Internet website (programming, layout and putting it online).</li> <li>- Making a public presentation of the experience that covers the various types of knowledge gained (empirical knowledge, know-how and social skills).</li> </ul>



## IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

In parallel, *Amarres et Voilures* is also associated with the Social Science program in which the students have as their project to set up an Internet website to allow for the creation of a research database derived from research dealing with various problems linked to the realities of the host community in *Coopesilencio*. The first students in this program completed their Comprehensive Activity in this subject in 2008-2009.

Whether or not it includes an international dimension, the Comprehensive Activity in Social Science has students demonstrate their personal integration of the learning associated with the program (MELS, 2001, p.61) as much in terms of methodology (survey techniques) as in terms of the development of knowledge-generating attitudes (openness to the world). Normally what we recognize to be an integrative project is a pooling of knowledge which often takes the form of written work that is part of a broader collective context: the creation of a single-issue magazine, the addition of articles to the virtual collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia, etc.

To date, six Social Science students have participated in an internship in Costa Rica as part of their Comprehensive Assessment. We noticed that, in this context, the personal integration of learning specific to this program is greatly facilitated. In fact the 'novelty' aspect, that the young interns note in many regards, offers them an opportunity to make comparisons, to establish parallels between existing types of organizations, their lifestyles, their values; and in so doing they take a critical look at their own North American existence. The completion of such a project was only possible thanks to a major fund-raising campaign which allowed students in the Social Science and Management profile to implement strategies consistent with the teaching they had received: such as the search for sponsors, the financial management of activities, etc. Parallel to the students' numerous financial activities, some themes were also selected — for example the role of the Costa Rican woman and everyday eating habits — themes for which the students needed to conduct interviews with people in the community. On their return, the students divided up the tasks in Table I among themselves so that they could develop an Internet website. Finally, it was within the framework of the course that includes the Comprehensive Assessment (Process for the Integration of Knowledge in Social Science) that the interns were required to report to the college community (management, teachers, as well as parents and friends) on their approach and therefore on the bridges that they constructed between the knowledge (learning, know-how, social skills) acquired abroad and the core knowledge of the Social

Science program, all by means of the presentation of their Internet website<sup>2</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is obvious that these projects happen on a case by case basis and in response to a need for pedagogical innovation coupled with an openness to the world and integrated directly into the students' learning. Other formulas are possible in order to generate projects of a different character whether they be in our Costa Rican community or elsewhere. For example, in Natural Science it would be possible to proceed differently by gathering data on a subject in the field and following up with laboratory experiments after returning. However, the basic idea is still to be useful, in so far as that is possible, to the host community. Even in a small college-level study centre like ours, we are concerned to maintain the highest possible standard of quality: that is to make the most of the opportunities that are offered to us. Moreover, in Natural Science, the evaluation committee for the Comprehensive Assessment which consists of representatives from all the general and specialized disciplines of the program, has found the concept of work with an international dimension to be very interesting and has judged the resulting work produced to be equivalent in pedagogical terms to the usual projects.

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The students appreciate these links to their programs of study. Moreover, financial partners like the *Office Québec-Amériques pour la jeunesse* are asking more and more that projects demonstrate added value to the students' studies or to their career projects. The students are also very happy with how much of a head start they get in advancing their Comprehensive Activity in Costa Rica compared to other teams that do not take advantage of this approach. Furthermore, they develop many cooperative and entrepreneurial values that can only be of benefit to them as they continue their studies and upon their actual entry into the work force, we believe. Among these values we would mention mutual aid, solidarity, autonomy as well as a sense of organization, of making an effort and of assuming responsibilities. These students are also able to tackle real-life problems. These authentic learning situations affect the students directly on an emotional level, making them feel useful by virtue of the work they are doing.

<sup>2</sup> [web.cgaspesie.qc.ca/stages\_costa\_rica/]







The involvement of the program teachers is necessary for these projects to go forward and it is clear that the *CECI* context promotes such links since we have multi-disciplinary departments which are established on the basis of the programs. Thus the teachers of most of the individual subjects in a given program already find themselves sitting around the same departmental table. In Costa Rica, the people in charge of both *Coopesilencio* and the gardens change regularly. This means that the communication work needed to align the objectives of the host community to the work that our students can carry out there is an ongoing process. In this regard, we have managed to get funding to enable a community representative from Costa Rica to visit us in the summer of 2009. The internship accomplished by the students during the 2009-2010 winter session also made it possible for a second unit from our CEGEP, the *Centre d'études collégiales Baie-des-Chaleurs*, to participate by means of the integration of five students and one teacher to our group from *Les Îles*.

These projects require a high degree of adaptability because many external factors can come along to modify the established work plan. In 2008, for example, the composting site was levelled by a tropical storm and the ensuing flooding delayed the start of the group's work. Another group had to temporarily flee the community and its projects because of an illness, dengue fever, which was found there. The demanding physical work in these hot and humid tropical locations, the very early morning work schedules, the food and living conditions that are very different from ours are just some of the factors that, in spite of everything, make this type of experience be unforgettable and the learning that is achieved there be very meaningful and long-lasting for everyone! ●

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## STIMULATING INTERNSHIPS IN ARTS, LETTERS AND MEDIA (ALM)

In addition to projects carried out in Costa Rica for the past three years now, *Amarres et Voilures* has been coordinating an internship in television in France involving students from the Arts, Letters and Media program. This internship takes place in a French web television station [www.5050.tv] and it offers participants the chance to report on social and cultural life in Normandy, under the supervision of a French journalist. This internship is demanding. Students must produce four three-minute reports during their three-week summer stay. The experience is nevertheless enriching and in line with their area of training. A communication teacher offers a series of preparatory meetings prior to their departure, allowing them in this way to get to know the region, to identify topics and to create scenarios for them in certain situations. There too, the results are interesting because they provide an opportunity for students attracted to communication and journalism to add a practical and stimulating dimension to their training and to discover a region of France.

Students in ALM also participate, in different ways, in the activities in Costa Rica. The students in this multi-disciplinary video and arts program, moreover, were the first to instigate the realization of a collective pedagogical activity in *Coopesilencio* when they created an artistic mural on newly constructed tourist cabins. The interns from this same program also did a lot of video filming and took many photographs over the years and this enabled them, upon their return, to make presentations, write articles and organize exhibitions for the benefit of the entire college community. For these students whose training included documentary reporting, the Costa Rica projects provided a concrete experience in filming and media production.

A biologist and a teacher at *CECI* for over twenty years, Lucie D'AMOURS has previously worked as a nature guide and in a variety of field projects in Îles-de-la-Madeleine. She is in charge of the Natural Science program for which she has helped to establish the guidelines of the Comprehensive Activity, especially its international dimension.

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