

Top 10 takeaways from the Where There Be Dragons RMS - Rocky Mountain Seminar 2023.

The focus of this event is to explore and share best practices in Global and Experiential Education. I have summed up important aspects of what I learned and/or what was discussed. I've also included some specific thoughts regarding the application of this knowledge in the context for STA in the list below.

1. Intentional program design: Weave the “why” of travels into the itinerary with as much attention as the activities themselves. Design travel experiences with STA (Dragons) core learning outcomes. For Dragons these are Global Engagement, Self-awareness and Leadership, Skill Building. At STA, our guiding question for Interim experiences is an example of this quality. At STA experiential and/or field experiences can be centered around outcomes, such as the specific aspects of our Portrait of a Graduate.

2. Shared mental model: The program outlines concentric program layers that facilitate leadership and create space for profound student engagement. In order to guide students towards transformational and impactful experiences, Dragons programs are to be built with students' personal growth at the center and to promote courage, activism, awareness and compassion. Designer(s) should have a clear understanding of what experiences might foster these traits). The implementation of multi-directional leadership (leading from behind) one way to ensure that these goals are met.

3) Program Containers and Container Building: A container refers to (overlapping) layers of structure and program integrity that work together to shape the parameters of the experience. The individual container, student group container, instructor-team container, course container, Dragons container and for us, the STA container, will serve to ground the student and the experiential learning, hold the student experience at center, and provide a platform for true engagement and transference of what is learned. Example: the student group container provides a platform for accommodating each student to assure that every voice is heard and a culture of open discussion.

4) Course Design Flow: Dragons courses are designed with the return “Home” and more specifically the application of learning outcomes, otherwise known as transference, in mind. Dragons charts a 5-phase course progression as such: Course start - Tone setting and Orientation, Skills acquisition, Practicing phase, Expedition phase, Transference phase. Each of these can include invaluable steps such as container building and development, framing and debriefing and risk management activities.

5) Risk Management: Dragons consider various layers of best practices, including learning into risk (the learning zone is synonymous with discomfort), mapping out risks and risk tolerance. Charting perceived vs. actual risks, objective and subjective hazards using the risk management

quadrant technique. Utilization of the course start checklist and implementing a united leader front on issues that arise. There are aspects of this that overlap with expectation setting with students as well as with debriefing activities.

6) Core competencies of facilitation: A stipend is offered to instructors as these are not to be framed as free trips for facilitators, but rather a rare and important opportunity to engage with students on a critical experiential learning journey). Professional Development and training for instructors will ensure that experiences are designed in a way that is mindful of techniques to achieve best outcomes, management of risk, use of mental health techniques as well as best practices for course development, goal and expectation setting, tone-setting, de-briefing and other aspects that develop the various learning containers and transference practices. The SMART guide (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely/Tangible) is one example of a set of best practices when choosing a guiding question and designing a course or a single activity within a course. As a new teacher expected to take students on an international trip at the end of this school year, the lack of a stipend is my biggest concern at this stage and is a cause of real concern for me.

7) Framing and debriefing: Various aspects, including imagery used to promote the experience, setting student expectations is a critical piece, so that students are not disappointed, but have a shared mind-set as they approach an experience or activity. Dragons programs include a student commitment to a contract or code of conduct that includes open communication, addressing negative bias, articulation of needs. Students are not allowed cell phones on trips and a yak board or blog site is used to communicate with parents and family upon safe arrival, mid-experience, and pre-departure. De-briefing after each activity is a critical part of building the support students need during the experience, develops the student group container, provides opportunity to anchor in discourse, reflective activities and transference of what is learned. This time needs to be scheduled into each activity. For example it is to be avoided that students are transported from activity to activity with no time set-aside to reflect as a group, in small groups, or individually.

8) Community Engagement / Voluntourism: Be prepared to leave biases at the door and open yourself to engaging the community according to their own context. Ask questions of your intentions before engaging with the community. Re-examine the purpose and outcomes of volunteering. Does volunteering truly benefit the community? Is it perceived as altruism by the volunteer and as selfishness by the community? Can it be interpreted as an extension of colonialism and patriarchy, the provider / receiver mindset and the us vs. them mindset. As an example of poor community engagement: Don't study what it means to be black in a community if you don't even reflect on what it means to be black or white for yourself. Don't study a community (member), study with a community (member). Allow yourself to be fully present in the moment (there is opportunity to reflect upon STA core values at various points along the journey and these should be in mind when planning learning outcomes of the experience as a whole and for each constituent activity). As an example of a faulty volunteerism mindset: Outcomes benefits the volunteer's self image but fails to provide a true service to the community partner. Children are clothed and/or shoed en masse, but this disrupts the local economy and

puts other individuals out of business. Community engagement activities should be considered as having holistic and sometimes unforeseen consequences.

9) Importance of Ceremony and Group building activities: Opening ceremony has a psychological effect with positive outcomes such as self-reflection, group building, expectation setting and transference. Routines are also of critical importance. Morning check-in PENX (Physical, Emotional, Needs, X-Factor) - this routine starts each day. Debriefing activities can take shape with the larger group or in small-groups and/or individually. End-of-day briefings are also of great use, as is the closing ceremony, discussed below. Shy and/or more passive students have an opportunity to be heard and can find a platform for taking leadership roles. Typically an instructor is assigned to each small group to facilitate discussion with guiding questions that are planned with learning outcomes in mind.

9) Cross-cultural engagement: This is at the core of what activities challenge students' preconceptions and stereotypical notion, allowing opportunities for discussion, reflection and for personal growth. For example, with engagement with a text and open dialogue as an anchor, students can address negative biases, self-awareness and development of a personal mindset that allows for the achievement of core learning outcomes.

10) Transference / Integration: With learning outcomes in mind, this state is the one we begin with when designing or retro-fitting a program, because it is perhaps the most important and should inspire the entire planning. Dragons shared a toolbox of transference activities. A closing ceremony is important and oftentimes students have great ideas for this. Instructors can invite them to create an activity and provide resources for implementation. Some items from the toolkit include a guided review of the entire experience, integration of a talisman or wearable object, complementing the team by listing traits at ceremony, writing a note to self, head tap (recognition) activity, fondest memories/greatest takeaway, sharing journal, thank you circle and letters.

[Top 10 Takeaways](#) from the Where There Be Dragons Rocky Mountain Seminar.

Please reach out to schedule a meeting with **Aaron to learn more about STA's travel philosophy.**