

Affective Teaching: The place of place in interdisciplinary teaching

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Abstract:

Canadian universities are increasingly called upon to internationalize their curriculum; we argue, however, that internationalization of the curriculum needs to be supplemented by place-based teaching. Place-based studies focus on layers of meaning found right beneath our feet and explore how localized understanding can enrich experiences. Thus eight faculty from diverse disciplines at our university formed a community of practice to investigate how our disciplines address place and how we embrace (or fail to embrace) place within our teaching. This essay presents the results of our investigations while preserving our individual voices to highlight the multivocality of place, itself. Our disciplines take widely divergent approaches to both the concept and specifics of place; however, we recognized in each of our disciplines a widespread neglect of place. We found that our engagement with place in our teaching manifests in varied ways—embracing the concrete and the abstract, the theoretical and the experiential. However, the common thread running through all of our teaching is that place matters because it encourages new ways of questioning and being in the world.

Key Words:

place-based education, community of practice, interdisciplinary, collaborative, experiential, engagement.

Introduction

Given the speed and ease with which we move across this globalized terrain—both literally and digitally—it is difficult to draw students' attention to the specifics of place. For example, Canadian students from our university, when travelling 150 m/hour on the bullet train through the Japanese countryside, experienced place as a video on fast-forward.¹ Likewise, when asked to explore local places, students automatically turn to Google Images rather than the places themselves. Pressured to memorize formulae, develop models, and master the newest technologies, students are tempted by 24-hour, instantaneous access to online information (Nicholson, 2009). Formations of virtual communities exceed or supersede localized experiences of place, both at home and away.

But why focus on place? Place-based studies provide the means to focus upon the layers of meaning right beneath a student's feet: a model for how to know place and an appreciation for how that understanding can enrich experience. Canadian universities are increasingly called upon to serve not only their traditional local and regional communities but also students from around the world. The responsibility to international students has been a primary focus in Canadian university curriculum development, with nearly 60% of Canadian colleges and universities offering or developing workshops on the "internationalization of the curriculum" for faculty members (AUCC, 2007). Just as Canadian universities are embracing internationalization, we are also having conversations about sustainable development. Engaging students in place-based learning opens a space for collective, localized conversation about what sustainability means in their communities (Delind & Link, 2004). In addition, place-based study

¹ T. Waldichuk, personal observation, Geography Field School, Japan 2010

enables education to have “some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” (Gruenwald, 2003, p.3). This is crucial in a more globally integrated world. We argue that an important component of this drive for internationalization is the linking of the local with the global through the development of place-based studies.

Place-based pedagogy is applied in curriculum revision and teaching delivery (Maude, 2009) in order to incorporate local empirical investigation and political engagement with human-environment relations (Sobel, 2004; Gruenwald, 2003). For example, a field trip to a repurposed garbage-dump-turned-grocery-store (Baldwin et al., 2010), unsettles place from its taken for granted *place* as a static container in which life occurs. By focusing on the local manifestation of complex social and natural relationships (e.g., Maude, 2009), place-based studies foster interdisciplinary thinking, inductive reasoning from individual observations with the potential for new understandings, participation in a broad range of activities, and the analysis of social and natural processes (Cresswell, 2008).

Recognizing the social processes of place-making, we argue that educational institutions have a responsibility to explicitly address place in curriculum. Certainly, as a profession, university faculty (and the institutions they serve) have been accused of devaluing place (Berry, 1987; Zencey, 1996). Our institution, Thompson Rivers University (TRU), is located in a distinctive place in south-central British Columbia, encompassing the semi-arid landscapes of Kamloops, Ashcroft, and Lillooet, the treed interior plateau of the 100 Mile House and Williams Lake campuses, as well as the mountainous alpine and sub-alpine area near the TRU Wells Gray Education and Research Centre. We argue that place-based education will complement the enormous effort devoted to internationalization of the curriculum on our campus (Birchard, 2010).

Our group came together in the fall of 2009 to investigate this potential. While there were TRU research programs investigating the specifics of place (i.e., the Community University Research Alliance’s Small Cities community development projects, and numerous ecological and natural resource projects), none had explicitly addressed place and teaching. Place-based studies would support strategic goals embraced by TRU such as overall student engagement, attention to the needs and concerns of both international and aboriginal students, and environmental sustainability (“Thompson Rivers University Strategic Plan 2007-2012,” 2007).

Through word-of-mouth invitations, our group, over time, came to consist of eight faculty members from disparate disciplines. Sitting around the table over the last eighteen months have been: Ginny, a literature professor; Lyn, an ecologist; Tom and Kim, both geographers; Ila, a visual artist; Lisa, an anthropologist; Tina, a historian; and Elizabeth, a writer and English language instructor. Without even being fully aware of it, our group evolved into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) to examine the value of place-based education, both in our own individual disciplines and in a potential interdisciplinary course that we could propose to the university. While the goals of the group were multi-faceted, an important first step was to educate ourselves and each other about the role that place does (or does not) play in our individual teaching. We began by writing statements that detailed the role of place through the lens of our respective disciplines and the more personal perspective in our own teaching. As our

group gained increasing cohesion, we realized that these place statements not only provided important information about the way in which place is articulated within various disciplines, but also tracked the development of our own journey within our community of practice.

This paper has three goals: (1) to compare and contrast how educators in different disciplines approach place-based education; (2) to examine the more specific commonalities and differences among our teaching practices with respect to place-based education; and (3) to develop, from our interdisciplinary community of practice, new approaches to teaching about place. We have retained our individual voices to articulate the role of place in our respective disciplines and in our teaching. The multiple voices employed throughout this paper reflect the multivocality of place itself (Rodman, 1992). In the final section, our voices converge to reflect upon the confluence of multiple perspectives within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) focused on place-based pedagogy.

Disciplinary Approaches to, and Conceptions of, Place

In our early discussions, we discovered that in many of our disciplines place has been overlooked or under-studied. Even in the presumably place-based field of geography, the concept of place has often been taken for granted, rather than critically interrogated. During the 1950's and 1960's, geography went through a quantitative revolution, and the relevance of place declined as each place was considered unique and thus could not be analyzed quantitatively (Norton, 2006; Wood, 2009). Similarly, the immediacy of place in ecology was lost during the first half of the 20th Century, when many practitioners felt compelled to abstract or quantify observed phenomenon into theories or models (Pyle 2001).

Likewise, Canadian historians have tended to use places to conduct case studies; in such analyses, places appear as containers for broader processes that could, presumably, take shape anywhere (McKay, 2000). Place also long escaped anthropological investigation: places were overlooked as merely the sites of culture, rather than as being themselves cultural products (Appadurai, 1988). As these examples suggest, we very quickly acknowledged the relative neglect of place in many of our disciplines. Yet, despite our varied disciplinary groundings, we shared an assumption that place matters.

How or why does it matter? What do we mean by the concept of "place"? Although we agreed that place matters, and that it has been regularly neglected or taken for granted in our disciplines and in university curricula, it soon became apparent that we approached, and conceptualized, place in very different ways. Despite our commitment to interdisciplinary engagement, our views on place were (sometimes stubbornly) anchored to the assumptions and languages of our respective disciplines. We discovered that our ideas of place ranged from abstract to concrete, national to local, theoretical to experiential. Is place an imaginative construction, or is it the earth beneath our feet? What do we mean when we say that place matters? Are we referring, specifically, to *this* place, or to place in a more generalized sense? It was to these, among other, questions that our group turned. As we spoke from and across disciplinary bounds, each member's reflections helped to enrich and occasionally reshape our

conceptions of place. Before returning to a discussion of our points of convergence, we now turn to a reflection on the specific understandings of place in the seven disciplines that make up our community of practice.

Tom

As a core concept in geography, place has been around for over a hundred years. Although its relevance declined during the 1950's, it has rebounded as the discipline of geography has matured. Place was originally considered in qualitative terms (Norton, 2006) as a framework to study areas (Wood, 2009) in the broader context of regional geography (e.g., Hartshorne, 1939), which was known long ago as chorology (Norton, 2006). Geography was describing areas with "place-based information" (Price, 2010, p.459). With the quantitative revolution, geographers focused on geographic space, measuring distances between phenomena and developing models from it (Jordan-Bychkov, Domosh, Newman, and Price, 2006).

Meanwhile, some humanistic geographers, particularly Yi-Fu Tuan, were advocating for the qualitative importance of place (Wood, 2009). They emphasized that places have meaning, and that people identify with certain places—particularly the places where they live. More recently, Tuan (1991) illustrated place-making by examining the relationship between the setting of *Anne of Green Gables* and PEI as a tourist destination. These new qualitative interpretations of place have led to the articulation of sense of place (Jordan-Bychkov et al., 2006) and placelessness (Relph, 1976). Sense of place refers to attachment to a place, whether one is a visitor or a resident (Jordan-Bychkov et al., 2006). For the resident, much of this attachment takes the form of boosterism and recalled experiences of one's place (Tuan, 1977). Tuan also highlights the distinction between the resident and the visitor's view of a place. Placelessness describes those places that look the same no matter where one goes—in particular the commercial strip with fast food establishments and other franchises—which reflect the influences of popular culture (Jordan-Bychkov et al., 2006). Norton (2006), however, argues that people who live or work in these places do become attached to them.

Kim

Place studies in human geography generally favour either humanist emphases on interpretation and subjective experience or critical studies of power relationships—or a combination of both. Both are human or social science-based philosophies raising the challenge of re-integrating the physical sciences within a discipline which has always boasted of its dual physical and social science roots. There are two iconic definitions of place in geography. The first, place is space with meaning (Tuan, 1977), validates our subjective experience of places which have both defined us and been the medium for our lives. The second, that place is uniquely located space, is deceptively simple. Places differ. Explaining this difference is geography, for the academic and for all curious wanderers (e.g., Lukermann, 1964). Yet law-seeking geographers of the 19th and 20th Century found the uniqueness of place problematic. There were no tools for studying unique places, especially once individual experience was acknowledged as integral to their creation. Early critics such as Carl Sauer (1925), rejecting the simplifications of the 19th century environmental determinists, saw each cultural landscape as a non-reducible, emergent phenomenon, dependent on place-specific

human-nature interaction. Humanist geographers took this further to examine place itself as intrinsic to human understanding of the world (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Buttimer and Seamon, 1980). And while critical theorists have preferred to focus on the social construction of place (e.g., Harvey, 1996), later philosophers have emphasised that place is “pre-scientific” even if socially constructed (Sack, 1997; Malpas, 1999). That is to say, human reality does not exist without it, and must be understood in its context. Tim Cresswell (2004) provides an excellent overview the development of “place” in geographic and other thought.

Lyn

Over the course of its history, the discipline of ecology in the natural sciences has had a convoluted relationship with the concept of place. While ecology is a young discipline, arising from the tradition of natural history, it has been pushed to move beyond the specifics of place to gain greater scientific validity. Nearly all modern definitions of natural history identify observing organisms in natural environments as key to a naturalist’s work. However, in the 18th Century, the appropriate place to study organisms was hotly contested, with the “cabinet naturalist” and the “field naturalist” both claiming that their respective place of study (museum vs. the field) granted them special authority (Burkhardt, 1999). The creation of zoos, botanical gardens, and aquaria further complicated the discussion of “the right place” to study organisms (Burkhardt, 1999). Today, digital laboratories also compete with field studies. In the 20th Century, the debate among ecologists on the value of manipulative versus observation experiments (Diamond, 1986) again questioned the right place to do ecology. A modern definition of ecology often includes the phrase “the scientific study of the interactions that determine the distribution and abundance of organisms” (Krebs, 2009, p.5). Regardless of where we do ecology, its very definition requires that we can name the organisms in a place.

On any day, in any lecture hall in North America, how many students can sing out the names of the iconic plants in their home? Carol Kaesuk Yoon (2009, p. 296) argues that our names for the iconic plants and animals in a place, whether springing from a folk taxonomy or the structured language of science, represent our “glorious views of life.” The danger lies not in the tree having different names from different folks (naturalist, scientist, First Nation elder, schoolchild), but in the tree having no name, and thus not mattering. Natural history is the aspect of ecology that is intrinsically place-based and the lack of natural history² training among ecologists and biologists has been vigorously lamented (Wilcove and Eisner, 2000). However, within the last 15 years, there has been a growing collective of academics who have championed the legitimacy of natural history as an academic pursuit (Wilcove and Eisner 2000; Trombulak and Fleishner, 2007) and the publication of an important volume that summarizes the contributions of place-based research to ecological understanding (Billick and Price 2010).

²The Natural History Network (<http://www.naturalhistorynetwork.org>) defines natural history as “exploring the stories of nature by attending to and representing the natural world. This practice, focused from the organism to the landscape, is the link between our species and the rest of the world.”

Tina

Historians long neglected the significance of place; in much of the historiography, places emerge as neutral sites of history rather than things that are historically made. While much early Canadian historiography focused on the national narrative, by the late 1960's scholars began to turn their attention to more regional and local histories. Borrowing approaches from other disciplines, particularly cultural geography, some Canadian historians have begun to incorporate place in their work in a way that challenges, rather than reproduces, regional essentialisms (see Lutz, 1999; McKay, 2000). Cultural geographers have long conceptualized place as shifting and contingent, rather than stable or essential (see Agnew, 1987). They have shown that place need not be considered a meta-category, something used not only to explain—but to explain away—important differences based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other categories. Rather, they have shown that place is constructed and negotiated in different ways by different people across time and space. Place, then, gives meaning to, but is differentiated by, class, race, gender, and other social identities. Some historians have thus begun to revisit certain places—regions in particular—to see these places as actors in, rather than just settings for, history. As the geographer Cole Harris (1997, p. 254) writes: “Societies and the places they occupy are part and parcel of each other. The one is not the stage on which the other evolves. Nor are societies made by their settings, as environmental determinists once thought, or settings the simple effects of human activities. The two are interrelated, each affecting the other in complex, ongoing interaction.” Historians have much to gain from, but also much to offer, this interdisciplinary discussion. As the historian Gerald Friesen (2002, p. 39) notes, the “habits of region are sunk deep in the Canadian soil and psyche.” An historical perspective is important because places cannot be understood without attention to their past; such a perspective is also important because by historicizing place we are alerted to its necessarily partial and shifting character.

Ginny

National and regional perspectives are also evident in the field of Canadian literature. Through much of Canadian literary history, scholars viewed place from a rural/nature perspective, emphasizing the human's relationship to the elements. In the middle decades of the 20th Century, for example, Northrop Frye (1971) viewed our literature as depicting society in contest with a hostile environment—a “garrison mentality” (p. 225). Frye also maintained that the question “Where is Here?” took precedence in the Canadian sensibility even over the question “Who Am I?” (p. 221). His famous pupil, Margaret Atwood, also influenced scholarship on Canadian literature by extending his insights in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, as well as linking place to national identity. Subsequent scholarship on Canadian literature has focused on Canada as a multicultural, postmodern, postcolonial, and even post-national place. Frank Davey (1993), for example, argued that Canadian literary scholarship has been unduly influenced by geographical determinism, and Linda Hutcheon (1988) has examined Canadian literature in the context of such influences as mass media. These trends are part of larger movements in literary studies as a whole—as well as other disciplines. However, regional perspectives on Canadian place are still popular (books and courses on B.C. literature and theatre, prairie literature, etc.) and a body of work on

the Canadian small city is emerging. Recently, scholarship on place in urban Canadian literature has emerged in such collections as *Downtown Canada*. Academic writing on Canadian literature continues to be preoccupied by the diversity, complexity, and ambiguity of Canada as a place.

Ila

Visual artists attend to the diversity, complexity, and ambiguity of place. The concept of place and place-based curriculum in visual art is not straightforward. Being the scruffy interlopers³ that artists are, and given their propensity for practicing in the spaces between certainties, the disciplinary view of place takes on multi-layered and interpenetrating aspects of memory, home, microcosm/macrocosm, human/post-human, and real/virtual. The moment a definition of place is articulated is the moment when artists begin to propose alternatives that challenge and contradict the certainty of the definition. Artists see the world as a banquet of information in which the ordinary becomes exceptional and valuable. They pay attention to information other than, or as well as, that which is required to survive. Artists observe themselves and how they see. They pay attention to shadow and light, smooth and rough, inside and outside, presence and absence, and any number of other phenomena not required to simply “get them through the day.” It is this deliberately expanded mode of engaging with the world that personifies artists as scruffy interlopers. Artists say and do the unexpected and often provoke their audience. They provide opportunities to reconceptualize well-worn and comfortable attitudes and perspectives. Geographer Yi Fu Tuan considers art a place (Tuan, 2004). Painting, music, theatre, poetry, film, sculpture, dance, and literature take on many attributes of place and offer constancy whenever they are re-experienced. While artistic practice can sometimes serve to quantify and analyze place (mapping, documenting, etc.) as do other disciplines and quantitative modes of research, it also serves to evoke experience and constancy of places not just real, but imagined (consider, for example, Peter Pan and Neverland or Anne and Avonlea). The arts are not bound by time, space, or chronology and thus can propose the preposterous as believable. When artists situate themselves in place—geographical, historical, social, and political—their understanding of overarching theories and critique becomes more personal. Subsequently they are able to speak through their art in more authentic ways.

Lisa

Cultural anthropologists scan the cultural landscape for those moments that appear ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ as sites where bundles of values, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours come together. Because culture is understood as the learned, shared, integrated matrix of meanings, beliefs, and behaviours through which people interpret and experience the world, those moments that are taken for granted as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ are ripe for anthropological inquiry. This has been the business of cultural anthropologists for a long time.

As anthropologists started to draw our attention to the importance of places as cultural productions, we recognized the complexities of the cultural values embedded in

³ “Scruffy Interloper” is a term that I borrowed from my colleague Terryl Atkins

place. Of this, Margaret Rodman (1992, p. 641) writes, "... places are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions." In other words, places are symbolic articulations of personal, political, historical, economic, and social relationships (Casey, 1996). Places are not merely the localities of culture, but, rather, mirrored reflections of history, values, interests, power relations, and meanings (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Rodman, 1992; Basso, 1996). They are those real and imagined spaces "in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs" (Foucault, 1986, p. 23). Places are thus densely occupied. Historical, social, cultural, and political relationships congeal and come into view as the places where we live our lives. This means that as places are culturally produced, they are also personally felt. We sense place. We know our places in the world, socially, culturally, and materially. And we know when we are out of place.

Elizabeth

A sense of being "out of place"—or displaced—is very apparent to those in the discipline of English language studies. Students studying English for academic purposes are often "international" or "visa" students, here temporarily—and so temporarily *displaced*—for the purposes of earning a degree or broadening their educations. Typically, international students live in residence or close to campus, and rely on public transit. Such a student will very likely be constrained in space by budget and circumstances, and also constrained in time, by the huge demands of post-secondary study in a different language and culture. Taken one step further, in our context, it is not uncommon for students to be in Kamloops for months without knowing their surroundings beyond a residence, their classrooms, and the big-box grocery store across the road; the mall up the hill might be as far as they would get in their day-to-day life. Faculty in English language programs, aware of such circumstances, often assume responsibility for teaching about place. Indeed, ESL, with its focus on a set of language skills, benefits from an infusion of content, and a focus on Canadian Studies often meets that need.

From another perspective, in the context of language study, place *determines* language—influencing accent, level of formality, style of diction, idioms, intonation, etc. Increasingly over the last twenty years, there has been a call for more attention to the local context as it influences English usage. Not surprisingly, the appeal—a call for "resisting linguistic imperialism"—arises from political concerns (Mitsikopoulou, 2002, p. 330; Canagarajah, 1999), and has been emerging from Asia to South America (McKay, 2003). Yet, the claims made to assert the importance of place in teaching English outside of its traditional settings can also be applied within Canada, and elsewhere. Language reflects the location in which it is used.

Actualizing Place Theory in Our Classrooms, Professional Development and Research Activities

With a sense of our disciplinary grounding in place, our community of practice shifted attention to how we actualized place-based learning in—and out of—the classroom. Subsequently, we discovered how our collaboration had influenced our

ongoing exploration of place in the classroom and beyond. A common conception of place emerged: socially constructed, reciprocally influential, as well as concrete and often local. Our reflections below cover a wide spectrum of undergraduate students and teaching practices, and workshops presented to colleagues and national educational developers. Moreover, we found that our descriptions of teaching place implicitly or explicitly embraced untraditional approaches. Our practice includes affective, cognitive, and psychomotor activities (or combinations thereof) and encourages personal approaches as well as skills such as creativity, synthesis, and analysis. In summary, holistic, multi-sensory experiences are fostered through experiences of place.

Ila

Until I began discussing a curriculum of place with teaching colleagues from other disciplines, I did not fully appreciate that focusing students on personal experience and concepts of place implemented a place-based pedagogy. I have since focused more consciously on how I view and implement concepts of place, as local, in my teaching and my art. Lucy Lippard (1997) observes that regional art is more desirable to sophisticated collectors than art that is derivative of the current marketplace. While centres such as New York transmit global influences in art, those influences originate in local and regional experiences, made special through art practice. Place, viewed as a rich source for inspiration and knowledge, becomes valuable to the beholder and invites reciprocity. If students in classrooms value place as a source of knowledge, then it is reasonable to expect them to involve themselves in place-based concerns. Art practice is an integral component for implementing place-based curriculum; as Tuan (2004, p. 20) says, "...in life I can't go home again, in art I often can."

Elizabeth

As a teacher of English to international students, I have endeavoured to foster the ability to focus and become attuned to place; to resist what has sometimes seemed a troubling sense of fragmentation in time and place. The current generation of university-aged students, including—and perhaps *especially*—ESL students, lives with such expanding and ever-shifting frames of reference that they may well require entirely new ways of knowing. In the essay "Information-rich and attention-poor," Peter Nicholson (2009) claims that the digital revolution leaves in its wake a scarcity of attention. Behaviour "inevitably adapts to conserve the scant resource—in this case, attention and time..."

Heather Menzies, in *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life* (2005), provides another perspective, illuminating the consideration of place in our university education. She links our increasing state of fragmentation to a changing sense of space-time continuum arising from our technological world. Taking this into account, Menzies aspires to teach her students to become *implicated*, *attuned*, and *attentive*. And, even as she does so, she worries that they seem too distracted to absorb; too overloaded to focus and engage.

A few years ago, faced with my first speaking and listening course, I struggled to find content upon which to scaffold the learning objectives. Setting off with a general focus on Canadian Studies, I quickly ascertained that my students had not even the germ of a

notion of this very *specific* place in which they had found themselves: Kamloops, the South Thompson River, even, indeed, British Columbia. That realization led me to a wealth of readily accessible content, much closer to home, to draw upon. Engaging in the challenge of teaching place also opened my own eyes to the possibilities of this place.

Lisa

Thinking about place is a reflexive gesture. It is from this affective, sensed place that I find one of the most powerful ways of using place-based learning to engage students with what I teach. Unsettling place from its status as the fixed location of culture and instead thinking about it as a cultural product and process also means thinking critically about one's own place in the world. It is within this reflexivity that I find place-based teaching so effective.

Place figures centrally in two important ways in the Indigenous Studies course that I teach. First, relationships with the land are central to Indigenous cultural complexes (Belanger, 2010). Everything flows from the land. Indigenous pedagogy, cosmology, social organization, economic subsistence strategies, political organization, and language are all rooted in, and flow out of, an intimate relationship with land. In my classes, we start here. With a sense of the importance of place established, I ask students to reflect on their own senses of place. Because place goes unnoticed so much of the time, students find this challenging at first. But once we start to tell stories about the places in our lives, we start to feel the intensity of place, to sense it. Students reflect on their houses, communities, neighbourhoods, towns, cities, and countries. These are not just the sites where their lives happen; they are productions of the complexes of histories, politics, economics, and culture that shape *how* their lives happen.

Second, I ask students to reflect on a time when they have felt "out of place." Understanding contemporary issues for indigenous peoples around the world, and specifically in Canada, requires an intimate acknowledgement of the impacts of displacements. The colonial project, in all of its manifestations, is above all else one of constant, relentless, and often violent displacements. So I ask my students to reflect on what it would be like to have everything that they know in their physical place-worlds taken away. Together, we contemplate what it would feel like to be moved suddenly to a foreign space that was not occupied by our own stories and histories. We consider the disorienting sensation of not know how to find the things we need in a space where we did not recognize physical features on the landscape to offer direction. The present starts to make a lot more sense when the fundamental importance of place and the devastating impacts of relentless displacements are not just acknowledged, but felt—sensed. From here we are able to contextualize everything else we learn about contemporary issues faced by indigenous peoples.

Lyn

Teaching ecology from a place-based perspective means that I must get my students out into the places in which they inhabit. I relish this idea, because it legitimizes *natural history* as a necessary component of ecology. If I bring a moss into a

laboratory, my students will be able to give a name to an organism viewed under a dissecting scope. But will they develop an understanding of its ecology? The plant has been removed from its *place* on a tree stump beneath a coniferous canopy and becomes instead a *specimen*. An ecology curriculum based on place must include the gifts of names surrounded by the context of individual species' ecologies. An ecology curriculum based on place demands that we study organisms within the context of their home.

But does this also demand that we look first to our own home for the objects of our study? In his book, *Place-based Education*, David Sobel (2004) argues that before we try to have our students understand the complexity of a tropical rain forest, we should introduce them to the diversity of life that resides in our temperate forests. The ecology textbooks on my bookshelf are rife with theories, but other than those found within the rare Canadian textbooks (e.g., Freedman et al., 2011), most theories are illustrated with the particulars of places far away from the sagebrush steppe and coniferous forest ecosystems that surround my students. I have come to realize that my commitment to place-based studies comes from a very personal concern for the state of the natural world that surrounds me. I teach my students to know the names of the iconic plants that surround us because perhaps if they know the intricacies of individual plant species they will become better defenders of natural ecosystems. This community of practice has taught me to probe the tension that resides in teaching place-based particulars. I need to teach about the local not as a bounded entity—with the potential for xenophobia—but as a starting point for knowing more distant places, too.

Teaching about place in all of my classes occurs best when we are outside. But I am uncomfortable with just saying, "Out, out, more field trips; more time outdoors." For students share this place not just with their fellow plants and animals, but also with people. I do what I do because I am the most comfortable swinging for the stars in the realm of ideas and plants. I cajole, or, at times, coerce my students to come along for the ride. I justify the importance of my work because I rest easy in my conviction that ecology underlies all we enjoy. That is, it is the ecology of the world that provides us with the air to breathe, the bread to eat and the water to drink. God bless ecology, I say, and then jump into the world of ideas and green things.

But, until this year, I had never asked what I and my students can do for ecology. If place is space with meaning and meaning comes through relationships, isn't the most authentic way for me to teach ecology from a place-based perspective to have my students build their own relationships—not just academic, disinterested sort of relationships, but meaningful relationships—with the co-inhabitants of their place? Shouldn't I be asking my students to commit to a place, including the people, in such a way that each student is personally and passionately committed to the success of a project? Asking questions about how to teach from a "place-based perspective" has challenged me to move beyond the walls of lecture halls or the known terrain of ecological field studies. This year, for the first time, I have a research student investigating how to get local schoolchildren involved in long-term monitoring for climate change.

Tom

Does taking students on local field trips involving local people equate with a curriculum of place? My colleague Lyn mentions that she wants her students to become involved in helping the local elementary school children learn about plants and climate change. Place in this sense takes on a new and different meaning from its geographic roots, one of interacting with the community to improve local living conditions for both the human and biophysical environment. This is a common theme in the curriculum of place literature (e.g., Bowers, 2008; Greenwood, 2008).

Whether in the field or in the classroom, I need to learn about and apply some of these new ideas about teaching place. As a geographer, I have often taught the definitions of place and sense of place in my lectures. In my fourth year cultural geography course, for example, I have expanded on sense of place and placelessness by showing slides and postcards. We also talk about branding communities—such as Kamloops, the Tournament Capital of Canada.

But in the 21st Century, place in teaching means more than just defining it in class. I have always taken my students on field trips to places in the Kamloops region to examine issues affecting local communities. For several years I took students to a nearby watershed, Upper Chase Creek, to talk about environmental problems that affect people in that local area. Over the last two years I have taken students on a field trip to study environmental issues in the eastern section of Kamloops. Collectively my department has run a field school in the Cache Creek area, focusing on socio-economic aspects of communities in the area. However, in all of these field trips I have never explicitly talked about sense of place or other concepts of place. My dealings with this curriculum of place group have compelled me to synthesize concepts of place covered in the classroom with place-based learning in the field.

Tina

I have encountered two central challenges as I endeavour to interweave references to place, and its importance, into my teaching of Canadian history. The first challenge involves presenting place as both socially constructed and material. Through readings and discussions, students are urged to share their perceptions of places, both lived and imagined. In sharing their perceptions, students gain a greater understanding of how places mean different things to different people depending on their social location.

Through our discussions, it becomes evident that we all carry certain “mental maps”—that we presume to “know” places that we have yet to visit (Ayers et.al., 1996, p.3). While place is socially constructed, it “feels solid and grounded” (Lang, 2003, par. 9). Through a range of examples, such as the development of Western protest parties and struggles over land and its meaning in British Columbia, I endeavour to show that place, while shifting and contested, has real consequences in everyday lives. As Rob Shields (1991, pp. 6, 199) suggests, regional myths “motivate” and have “social impacts.” To recognize place as socially constructed is not to deny its material relevance to human behaviour.

The second main challenge I encounter is that, when one teaches survey courses in Canadian history, regional and local stories risk being subsumed by the national

narrative. In the Canadian historiography, the national story typically emanates out of Ontario; historians who research other places note that studies that presume to be speaking for the nation are, in fact, based entirely on Ontario sources. To mitigate the Ontario-centric, nationalizing impulse of the survey course, I work to interweave regional and local examples into lectures, readings, and discussion. I also seek to destabilize the fixity of borders and challenge the primacy of the nation by conceptualizing place in a way that transcends political boundaries. Historian Katherine Morrissey (1997, p. 60) notes that place constitutes an “organized world of meaning” rather than a political entity. Such “worlds of meaning” could, I remind my students, cross political borders, as in the case of the Pacific Northwest.

My work with this group has alerted me to the importance, and to the possibilities, of embedding my teaching in *this* place, Kamloops.

Ginny

As a creator and teacher of such courses as Contemporary Canadian Drama, British Columbia Literature, and Humour and Satire in Canadian Literature, I have tended to view place from a somewhat abstract nationalist construct—a consequence of academic influence as well as my age, political leanings, and upbringing in Windsor, Ontario, so overshadowed by Detroit that my husband calls it “a city without a country”⁴. Place is a nation in which I dwell and by which I am informed.

However, as I have embraced experiential learning as a vital approach to university teaching, I have also come to see place as linked to identity in more concrete and immediate ways. For example, my research and publications on literature and theatre set in the Kamloops area have resulted in field trips—from a snowy March trek with Natural Resource Science students through the territory covered by George Bowering’s novel *Shoot!* to shorter trips with senior Arts students to productions of locally-inflected plays. These excursions are driven by my belief that context is important individually and collectively, and that, as Robert Kroetsch (1970) wrote, “In a sense, we haven’t got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real” (p.63).

Furthermore, my research within the Community-University Research Alliance’s “Mapping the Quality of Life & the Culture of Small Cities” has cemented my conception of place as a network of relationships in a local community. Supervision of undergraduate research assistants and stand-alone and co-curricular Service Learning courses has made it clear that experiential learning—in brief or multi-semester assignments, with faculty or professionals in such realms as the local theatre companies, art gallery, and women’s resource centre—is a key to unlocking doors to on- and off- campus communities.

Clearly, diverse concepts of place have informed my pedagogical theory. Community, in varied connotations, has been the common thread in my educational praxis. Currently, Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb’s (2005) situated learning theory, drawing upon earlier work of Vygotsky, most closely reflects my practice. To the Kolbs, learning involves “a transaction between the person and the social environment” and knowledge rests “not in the individual’s head but in communities of practice. Learning is

⁴ Alan Penfold

thus a process of becoming a member of a community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation” and learning spaces extend “beyond the teacher and the classroom” (pp.199-200). Whether I perceive place as an abstract concept or a very concrete space, the interactions of people are integral.

Kim

In geography, without an ability to experience and interpret place, we risk relying on outdated or unfounded interpretations based on abstractions from another place and time. By contrast, the intimate and rigorous investigation of place, which engages local knowledge and experience of human and natural complexity, can identify new knowledge and connections, and retrain observation and analytical skills. As the time-specific and place-specific nature of scientific investigation is increasingly acknowledged (e.g. Livingstone, 2003), the value of place-based studies of processes, rather than studying processes as abstractions, receives credibility. Common, even universal, social and physical processes exist; they are manifested continually and uniquely in place, and are interpreted and reinterpreted in a continual process of investigation.

For example, in a place-based examination of a specific big-box store, Superstore, in Kamloops, BC, participant knowledge augmented the number and complexity of place-forming processes. Field trip participants from both a fourth year postcolonial geography class and a pre-conference workshop of the 2010 Educators Development Caucus all had personal relationships either with the Kamloops Superstore or with Superstore in general. People knew the Kamloops store’s history, shopped there, worked there, chose not to shop there, or had experience with the chain in other locations. Such knowledge allowed more informed observations, comparisons, and contributions of original information. Participants volunteered observations on employee behaviour, shopper behaviour, and store policy. These contributions significantly changed the field trip experience, both in content and in instructor-student relations. By contrast, an analysis based on abstract processes actually favours the cultural bias of the theorist, and reinforces the social status of the instructor-theorist. When participants bring their own experiences, field trips are less prone toward a one-way transfer of information from organizer to participants.

Furthermore, the human identification *with* place is one of the formative processes of place; it is unique to each location and it is cumulative over time. As physical geographers increasingly acknowledge, even our study and knowledge of physical geography is shaped by cultural values (Trudgill and Roy, 2003; Nelson and Lawrence, 2009). If it were not, grassland geomorphology would garner the same attention as glacial and coastal geomorphology. That it *doesn’t*, reflects that glaciers inspire stronger emotional responses than grasses. Returning to the example of the Kamloops Superstore, the place-based approach seamlessly integrated complex discussion and observations about the altered physical setting and ecosystems arising first from emotional reactions and then from planning, land use, and physical science perspectives.

Both physical and human geographers can learn more about space-forming processes by examining them in place, by examining them across disciplines, and by

acknowledging the multiple roles place plays in defining what is studied. And, in one last stage of integration, we can integrate the academy itself. Place, and its formative processes, has always included the systematic study, and the political and social engagement, of the student, instructor, and the researcher.

Convergence

Even on a relatively small campus such as TRU, places are spaces with meaning that serve as markers of identity and belonging (and of exclusions). Before our committee began its work, two of us from the Faculty of Arts had never set foot in the Science Building. It is not common for faculty members to work across the Science-Arts divide. The sense of “out-of-placeness” experienced by Tina and Lisa as they entered this strange place called “Science,” was re-placed by the familiar territory of our community of practice.

We believe place-based learning erases boundaries between teaching and research. Our collaborative work has stimulated both a re-searching of the role of place in our respective disciplines and classrooms and a recognition that place, however it is conceived, is fertile territory for ongoing research. We agree that transformative educational experiences for both professor and students can be rooted in place, once professors transcend disciplinary boundaries and embrace collaboration and experimentation.

The dissemination of our Curriculum of Place work is further evidence of the impact of place upon people. As indicated by very positive feedback in our EDC workshop, place-based studies are timely and welcome. One participant noted “learning by doing with the two outdoor trips was especially useful in reconnecting [her] with Kamloops.”⁵ In addition, a colleague from ESL who attended another workshop has implemented place-based assignments that situate groups of students in the community in a variety of ways that engage them with local sport and tourism cultures to improve their oral communications.⁶ The colleague has had such success with these assignments that, in 2011, she organized a session of the TRU Engagement Series around place, which in turn has attracted additional colleagues from various disciplines to share their experiences with place curricula and discover new ways of engagement through place.

As this paper makes clear, members of our group perceive and approach place in varied ways, grounded as we are in our respective disciplines. However, this discussion also highlights several points of convergence. While at times we have struggled to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, more often we found that such boundaries became less consequential as we recognized and shared similar assumptions, perspectives, and paradigms. For instance, several of us emphasize the importance of local knowledge and argue that a deeper knowledge of *this* place can lead to a greater understanding of places. In addition, many of us share a conception of place as both imagined and material. We recognize that—if place is space with meaning—such meanings are unstable, uncertain, sometimes ambiguous, and always changeable.

⁵ Email from Alice Cassidy to group members, Feb 18, 2010.

⁶ Renting a car and attending a hockey game, for example, involve the students in local application of language skills beyond the university.

In addition to our more specific points of convergence, our group also shares an assumption that place matters. Place matters to each of us in different, discipline-specific ways, but it also matters to our community of practice in a shared way. Whether we emphasize the local or regional, material or abstract, theoretical or experiential, we all agree that place matters because it affects how we perceive of and live in this world. We agree that attending to place in our scholarship and teaching can help to make us, and our students, more engaged citizens. If we know more about *this* specific place, perhaps we will be more concerned about its present and its future. If we know more about how places are imagined and why, perhaps we will be better positioned to disrupt misguided assumptions and to make room for alternative imaginings. Our attention to place is neither neutral nor detached, but rather politically engaged; place matters because it encourages new questions and new ways of perceiving, and being in, the world.

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