Unlikely Connections: Place-Based Learning in Online Post-Secondary Education

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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MARCH 2021

ALEXANDRIA BOWMAN, 2021
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Abstract

Place-based learning has been setting its roots in academia for some time and only recently has it expanded its reach into the realm of online courses in post-secondary institutions. This research is twofold: It discusses the findings of whether place-based learning can successfully be implemented in online learning to create connections to place, and second, if the interactions that place-based learning requires from students can alleviate feelings of isolation they often endure. Drawing on a variety of courses from several institutions, students and faculty participated in electronic surveys and semi-structured interviews, offering their unique perspectives on the student experience of place-based learning in online courses. The results of this study have implications for institutions and instructors alike to ameliorate the online student experience through course design and subsequently affect the local communities where distance learners are based.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ............................................................................................................................................ 4

**Literature Review** ........................................................................................................................................ 9
  - Communication Technologies Facilitating Online Learning ................................................................. 10
  - Communication Technologies Creating Isolation ............................................................................... 11
  - Nature Becoming a Vocal Other ........................................................................................................... 13
  - New Grounds for Place ........................................................................................................................ 14
  - The Impact of Student Sense of Belonging ......................................................................................... 16
  - Constructivism and Importance of Place in Online Education .......................................................... 17

**Methods** .................................................................................................................................................. 20
  - Data and Data Gathering ..................................................................................................................... 20
    - Population 1 – Students .................................................................................................................... 21
    - Population 2 – Instructors ............................................................................................................... 21
  - Data Collection ....................................................................................................................................... 21

**Data Analysis** ........................................................................................................................................... 24
  - Isolation ................................................................................................................................................ 25
  - Relationships ....................................................................................................................................... 27
  - Connection to Place ............................................................................................................................ 31

**Discussion** .............................................................................................................................................. 33

**Conclusion** ............................................................................................................................................. 36

**References** ............................................................................................................................................ 38

**Appendix A** ............................................................................................................................................ 45

**Appendix B** ............................................................................................................................................ 46
“We are ultimately bound by and reliant upon the natural world around us.”

—David Attenborough, A Life on our Planet

Post-secondary education institutions have a longstanding tradition of instructors lecturing students in a one-way knowledge-sharing format. An approach that is newer to post-secondary and more commonly found in K-12 school systems is place-based learning, where the instructor is instead a facilitator to learning and the pedagogy is taken beyond textbooks and the confines of classrooms, immersing students in real world learning (Sobel, 2004). Place-based learning has been defined as “teaching and learning that is rooted in what is local — the unique history, environment, culture, and economy of a particular place,” where local surroundings provide the context for learning (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2013, p. 3). Gruenewald and Smith (2014) describe place-based learning as a significant movement in education for the past decade, although Dewey (1966) mentions its importance in academia much earlier. Where a traditional post-secondary course might have students read about building architecture in a textbook, a course incorporating place-based learning will have students go into their community to learn, study, and observe their local building architecture. This form of education provides a strong framework for supporting more-than-human connections, where nature and environment — whether natural or built — are active participants in learning, where they “can function as a discourse . . . not only imbued with meaning but which itself can help provide experience with meaning” (Rogers, 2009, p. 266). As seen in place-based learning research, this active participation leads to a kinship developed between the learner and their surroundings (Baldwin, Flood, Naqvi, Ratsoy, & Templeman, 2017; Fraser, 2016).
Alongside these changes in pedagogy, technology has helped education in exceptional ways as well. It has made post-secondary education more accessible for many, including for those in smaller and/or remote areas where accessing a post-secondary campus may be difficult. Despite its convenience and increasing availability, this format also has its detriments: The physical separation and subsequent lack of in-person engagement can give online learners feelings of separation, disconnection, isolation, and neglect (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Phirangee, 2016; Rovai, 2002). This is in comparison to the face-to-face communication, availability for immediate feedback and assessment, and personal connection that traditional classroom learning provides (Swan, 2005; Taverna, Kushnir, Berry, & Harrison, 2015). Additionally, more than the physical distance itself, the online delivery format can be the cause of difficulty, as McInerney & Roberts (2004) explain, “This feeling of isolation is not always generated simply because of geographical distance – even on-campus students undertaking an online course may experience a feeling of isolation from the rest of the courses participants” (pp. 73-74). The isolation from lack of in-person interaction between learners and their peers, as well as between learners and instructors can be a hindrance to student success, leading to dissatisfaction and attrition (Croxton, 2014; Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Kim & Yuan, 2014;). In many cases, researchers emphasize and stress the importance for students in online learning environments to develop connections with their cohort and instructors as a way to thwart feelings of isolation (Croxton, 2014; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Kim & Yuan, 2014; McInerney & Roberts, 2004, Phirangee, 2016). This can primarily occur by developing online communities where synchronous and asynchronous communication can take place, such as the class’ online learning forum sections (Kim & Yuan, 2014; Erichsen &
Learning from classmates and instructors has deep value, and yet this is challenging in online learning because social cues play a large role in understanding one-another, where messages are often misinterpreted when communicated online (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Phirangee, 2016; Rovai, 2002). Creating community through online coursework can be difficult, as exchanges between students generally remain impersonal and formal without having spent time face-to-face. For online learning, making connections is critically important for many students to escape feelings of loneliness (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; McInerney & Roberts, 2004; Rovai, 2002).

With online learning often causing isolation and place-based learning offering connection, the purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty experiences of how place-based learning can help alleviate the disconnect that post-secondary learners in online education feel as they undertake their studies. Therefore, the research questions were:

1. How can post-secondary online education use place-based learning to create human and more-than-human connections to place?

2. In what ways can place-based learning alleviate online learners’ isolation and disconnection from their local communities?

While there has been extensive research done on online learning (Croxton, 2014; Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Huang H.-M., 2002; Huang Q., 2016; McInerney & Roberts, 2004; Shaw & Polovina, 1999; Kim & Yuan, 2014; Martin & Bolliger, 2018) and separately, on place-based learning (Ardoin, 2006; Baldwin et al., 2017; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014; The Rural School and Community Trust, 2013; Zandvliet, 2012), minimal information has been found on these two concepts paired together.
To conduct this research, data were collected from both teaching faculty and post-secondary students who have been involved in online education with a place-based learning component. This was done through electronic surveys and semi-structured interviews. The research looked at whether or not integrating place-based learning into online post-secondary pedagogy could be a solution to creating connections for online learners. Whereas in a physical classroom and in online learning, the connections are solely student-to-student and with their instructors, place-based learning offers an alternate source of connectivity by allowing human-to-human connections as well as more-than-human connections when students are able to integrate their surrounding environment into their learning. First, place-based learning can create a connectedness to the local environment, culture, and area. This allows learners to bond to their local communities, and in gaining their sense of place, it can positively impact the area (Baldwin et al., 2017; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014). Second, it can address the isolation that online learners can endure, by providing additional discourse and interactions with locals and nature. And third, as students bring their knowledge back to their online community, this enriches the experience of each classmate as well as faculty as they learn from one-another. Everyone involved can, in effect, come to appreciate multiple places. The sense of place and newfound inclusion can potentially spur increased learning motivation and engagement, which could have the effect of reducing the current dropout rates for online learning in the long-term.

**Literature Review**

For the research questions to be properly addressed, the following literature review first investigates North American post-secondary online education and how the
communication technologies used can connect yet also isolate its learners. Following this, place-based learning is explored with a regard to isolation as well as inclusion. The review concludes by looking at the literature of these factors brought together.

**Communication Technologies Facilitating Online Learning**

During the 1990s post-secondary institutions used the advent of the internet to innovate their curricula and programs by offering online courses (Haughey, 2013). In the 2016/17 academic year, 1.36 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in Canada, and over 65% of Canadian post-secondary institutions had online course offerings (Beattie, 2019). With online education growing at 2% per year in Canada, it has been described as a “dynamic, fast-changing area of education” where its flexibility, convenience, and access are borderless compared to traditional classroom settings (Bates, 2018; Croxton, 2014, p. 314). With recent issues such as the global pandemic of COVID-19 where in-person interactions and gatherings have become limited, online learning has become the primary means for many post-secondary institutions to continue their teachings. Having institutional online learning platforms already in use with technical support readily available has made providing the majority of coursework electronically a relatively straightforward, yet often difficult, transition for both students and instructors.

With further regard to students in higher education, most students are frequently surrounded by communication technologies within their institutional learning environment as well as daily within their life. Statistics Canada reports that in 2015/2016 the average age of students enrolled in for-credit post-secondary programs was 24, and 32 for those enrolled in non-credit programs (Statistics Canada, 2017). Further to this, 96% of Canadians aged 25-34 use the internet everyday, and 88% of all Canadians have a mobile
phone (Government of Canada, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2017). With people having technology at their fingertips, post-secondary institutions have adapted to often communicating with students via their electronic channels such as student email and student/school portals because it is fast, effective, and wide-reaching.

While communication technologies can be isolating if we allow them, they can also lead to connectivity; they have enabled many in smaller and/or remote communities as well as working adults to enroll in post-secondary education, allowing them to connect to their classroom as peers, albeit from a distance. Rovai and Jordan (2004) did a comparative analysis between traditional and fully online graduate courses and found that distance education is inescapable as a form of learning and will only continue to be prevalent and expand. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for many post-secondary schools to increase their online course offerings. At present, the communication technology used in fully online programs has evolved to allow for synchronous and asynchronous communication alike. While synchronous communication is possible through technology such as instant messaging systems, video conferencing, and phones, asynchronous communication tools such as learning management systems with class forums and emails, are equally as essential as they allow students time to reflect on questions before responding (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Rovai (2002) specifically addresses learning networks and e-learning software such as Blackboard, WebCT, and the internet as common asynchronous communication tools used in post-secondary online learning.

**Communication Technologies Creating Isolation**

Communications technology, such as mobile phones, computers, and the internet, is part of globalization on an educational level where people from different regions, countries,
and even continents can study together. This technology helps to connect students as well as everyday people in their busy lives; however, it has been argued that it also feeds into the ways in which our populace has become isolated. In their book, authors Baldwin et al. (2017) discuss how our Western culture has shifted to longer commuting times, a trend for homogeneous suburban neighbourhoods, and a decrease in civic and political participation. Taras also noted this in his book, where the downturn of participation and social capital in most Western democracies has been linked to, “‘public disconnection,’ . . . ‘citizens [who] are adrift’. . . . and the development of a me-first society” (Taras, 2015, p. 40). Further to this, Taras (2015) points out the irony of digital natives – namely those who have grown up surrounded by digital technology – in how they are more technologically savvy and global than ever, with a passion for human rights, equality, and hot-topic issues. And yet this generation is also devoid in the political landscape and struggles with identity while being “rootless, distrustful, disconnected, and arguably unhappy” (Taras, 2015, p. 41). He describes them as “peek-a-boo citizens: Connected in some ways and disconnected in others” (Taras, 2015, p. 57). This disengagement is worrisome when considering the future well-being of communities.

In addition to our Western society becoming more sequestered, student learners, many of whom are also digital natives, are faced with this in their online learning environment as well. Students undertaking online learning may be geographically distanced and with little opportunity to interact with the immediacy of synchronous communication due to work commitments and different time zones (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004, p. 78). While there is value in using electronic platforms to communicate for coursework, it has been found that online learners experience higher levels of isolation and
attrition (Croxton, 2014; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Rovai, 2002). And although online learning can be beneficial for reasons noted in the previous section, the lack of face-to-face communication makes it difficult to exchange ideas and create connections, which can hinder the opportunity to gain new knowledge (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Studies have shown that the quality of an online learning environment has a significant link to a student’s decision to either stay or drop out of their course; they withdraw due to experiencing absence of interaction, lack of sense of community, and isolation (Croxton, 2014; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Rovai, 2002). Further to this, Rovai (2002) wrote about building a sense of community at a distance. In this study, he discussed how the reduced social presence and social context cues make online communications less personal, “As cues are fewer, social presence is lower, and as social presence goes down so does sense of community” (Rovai, 2002, p. 8).

Although Rovai is referring to the importance of building a sense of community within the online learning environment to make it feel more personal for learners, perhaps another way to have personal/social connections created is outside of the online learning platform, by implementing place-based learning. Therefore, using place-based learning as a pedagogical approach in online learning to help learners gain connections, whether human or more-than-human, is discussed in the following sections.

**Nature Becoming a Vocal Other**

Martin Buber’s dialogic theory of the I-thou relationship is strongly embedded in the phenomenological tradition threshold, which addresses how people understand the world and self-develop through experience (Buber, 1923/1927; Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). Focusing on the aspect of human experience, Buber’s dialogic theory looks at individuals
and their sense of “feeling” and “being,” and of meeting the Other as an equal (McKendry, 2019). In the case of place-based learning, nature needs to be regarded as an Other, as dialogue is not limited to human-to-human interactivity. Relating to nature in an I-thou way will lead “to a more intimate environmental relationship that will help you feel part of the greater whole” (Knapp, 2005, p. 278). Applying Buber's dialogic theory leads to an understanding that despite nature being an atypical Other, the relationship needs to be fostered as something of equal value, “Relation is mutual. My Thou affects me, as I affect it” and “Certainly the world dwells in me as an image, just as I dwell in it as a thing . . . . The world and I are mutually included, the one in the other” (Buber, 1923/1927, pp. 15, 93). This theory also leaves space for communication and connection with otherworldly beings, whether with the unseen, such as spirits, or with non-human beings, such as animals, plants, and structures. Buber describes dialogue with an Other as a mutually engaging relationship that “contributes to the constant redefinition of participants in the dialogue as well,” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, p. 243) which in turn helps us to form our own identities.

Put into context with place-based learning, dialogue cannot be limited to interactions between people; the environment is an atypical Other that communicates and guides human experience through learning. Indeed, this is consistent with Indigenous beliefs, where spirits, territory, and the wildlife inhabiting the territory are highly valued and act as a guide for values and decision-making in the 21st century (Williams & Snively, 2016). With nature however, we tend to treat it as an inferior, which makes the I-thou relationship impossible to achieve under this mindset. In the realm of North American education systems, the transition to valuing place is slowly taking effect.

New Grounds for Place
Gruenewald (2003) has identified problems between place-based learning and traditional classroom pedagogy, where place-based learning is often more focused on ecological and rural settings, and traditional pedagogy looks at social and urban contexts, with each method neglecting areas of the other. He remarks on this shortfall, where “both critical pedagogy and place-based education have through these silences missed opportunities to strengthen each respective tradition by borrowing from the other” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 4). There is truth in this for online environments as well: Understanding how to blend these approaches together in an online course is important because distance learners are situated in both rural and urban settings. Numerous authors (Baldwin et al., 2017; Dewey, 1966; Fraser, 2016; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014) have identified the need of place-based learning to be implemented within the education system, however the opportunity for place-based learning within an online course has not been discussed within their works, which is why this has been identified as a gap that can be addressed.

Using place-based learning as a call to action in order to create a connection to sense of place and mitigating isolation is what leads to the rationale of using it in online learning. There is evidence of its need, from digital natives’ disconnection, to society accepting isolation in the name of digital communication progress, to online learners feeling separated due to lack of communication. With the recent onset of COVID-19 causing post-secondary institutions to switch a large portion of their classes to online, many instructors struggled, albeit mostly successfully, to integrate their place-based learning assignments into the new online format. With creativity and deliberation, many more place-based assignments could be adapted for online programs. Studies have found that assignments
involving interaction within one’s local, geographic community can create an alternative connection leading to enculturation (Baldwin et al, 2017; Powers, 2010; Williams & Snively, 2016). With regard to teaching faculty, Baldwin et al. (2017) stated that after reviewing the place-based assignments from students, it stimulated them to view their surroundings differently, and expanded their thought and practice. In their effort to join “the human and the more-than-human worlds” in their book, Gruenewald and Smith (2014) describe how place-consciousness can allow for a process of decolonization, reinhabitation, and create sustainable relationships presently and for the future (pp. vii-viii). In online learning, students could share their work in their learning platform, creating a valuable environment for faculty and classmates to learn from.

The Impact of Student Sense of Belonging

As long as there is a stable internet connection, online education is attainable for most Canadians regardless of location. However, in adult lifestyles uprooting oneself from one’s hometown for employment or educational opportunities is common. This continual relocation does not allow for intimate relationships to develop to places, creating a rootlessness and disconnect to one’s area. This “placelessness” leads to feeling separate from others and not partaking in community activities, and it can prove difficult to rebuild this connection when a sense of belonging is a process earned only after spending considerable time in one place (Baldwin et al., 2017, p. 8; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014, p. xvi). One thing that many studies showed was building relationships within learning environments is important. In online learning specifically, the communication technology used by the institution, as well as having the opportunity to connect to one’s classroom
community, can help diminish the students’ sense of isolation while creating a sense of belonging (Huang, 2002; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

In a study done to compare the sense of community between traditional, blended, and fully online courses, both “connectedness” and “learning” ranked lowest in online learning when compared to their counterparts (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). “Offering the convenience of fully online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact may be adequate to nurture a strong sense of [classroom] community in students who would feel isolated in a fully online course” (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Place-based learning can aid with the sense of belonging where communication technologies act as a hub; students can bring their knowledge back to their online classroom, drawing together a variety of perspectives for a richer learning experience. From an instructor standpoint, Baldwin described learning about place from a class assignment as “reading the postcards [assignment] provided us with insight into the rich and deeply textured senses of place held by our students . . . prompting us to include in our lectures new examples,” and from another instructor: “The results were rewarding from a cultural and geographical perspective in that the students learned more about each other, their home places and the tourist landscape” (Baldwin et al., 2017, p. 84, 85). Integrating this type of place-based learning assignment into online education is feasible, and it would be important for students to share their assignment results within their online classroom community, so that they could learn from each others’ place.

**Constructivism and Importance of Place in Online Education**

If a bond can be formed between a learner and locale, it can help to build a student’s personal identity and attachment to their local, geographic community (Fraser, 2016).
Fully supporting appreciation of place and similar to Buber (1923/1927) and Knapp’s (2005) beliefs, Rogers (2009) argues that we should be working towards a togetherness of mutual engagement and seeking dialogic, interdependent, fluid relationships with the natural world (p. 268), as opposed to perceiving our surrounding environment as separate from human experience and a mere context for our communication (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017, pp. 192-193; Rogers, 2009, p. 268). Essentially, Rogers is speaking to the importance of appreciation of place as a whole, and similar to Indigenous teachings, some teaching faculty have applied this perspective into their pedagogy by implementing place-based learning as a way to engrain a consciousness of place within learners.

Rovai (2002) states that in order to build a sense of belonging in distance learning, the medium (being communication technology) enables the initial connection to occur, after which the nurturing of the classroom community is on the learners and instructors. As found in other literature there is an emphasis towards the need to have synchronous and asynchronous communication to help influence the learning, whether it is through online mediums or with a person (Croxton, 2014; Huang, 2002; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). By integrating place-based learning into online environments, it can encourage students to go into their local community to make the in-person and more-than-human connections. Similarly highlighted by Huang (2002) and Swan (2005), the authors both discuss how in constructivist environments, the instructor is merely a facilitator for student learning, since the learning taking place is individual, subjective for each student, and based on one’s active experience.

Furthermore, Huang (2002) discusses how adult learning should be grounded in experience with real-world environments for gaining meaningful knowledge. She
elaborates, detailing how the education component can provide real-life learning, instead of the gap that is normally found between “the school world and real-life society” (Huang H.-M., 2002, p. 34). This reflects Dewey’s perspective, in which he viewed education being lost in formal systems: “There is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience. The permanent social interests are likely to be lost from view” (Dewey, 1966, p. 7). Dewey was able to understand the importance of learning through experience and the unique culture it creates, and that the brick-and-mortar classroom is not the only place that provides learning.

Lastly, Tsatsou (2009) offers a strong case of linking the importance of place and space through the use of digital technology. "One could argue that through mediated images, people either become aware of the existence of other places or enrich their perceptions of what a place can be, acting in favour of the evolution of their own place” (p. 27). This ties together what place-based learning can accomplish through distance learning, ultimately achievable through the use of communication technologies: A new sense of place created online, but also a sense of place to the physical. Tsatsou (2009) further elaborates that “mass and new electronic communications mediate the sense of place and succeed in interconnecting remote places in global electronic spaces” (p. 27). Communication technologies used in higher education can bridge a gap where connecting geographic locations is enhanced through digital communications. While the digital sphere can easily isolate a person, communication technologies also allow a person to learn more about their own region and that of others, become informed of events, bond to their community, and take part in other areas of civic engagement. Place-based educators are
still supportive of formal education structures, however they argue that “the study of places can help increase student engagement and understanding . . . learning that is not only relevant but potentially contributes to the well-being of community life” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7). Because of these positive aspects, it is hoped that online learners can benefit from place-based learning as well as lessen any feelings of isolation they are likely to experience, create a sense of belonging, and offer a newfound appreciation of place leading to more engaged citizens committed to nurturing their local surroundings.

Integrating place-based learning into online educational pedagogy challenges the notion that online learning can lead to isolation; joining the two can enable an unexpected connection – building a link to one’s immediate community. The research performed in this study can not only help understand how students can connect to their own community and surroundings, mitigating isolation, but it can also help inform instructors of ways to incorporate place-based learning into their courses so they can better improve the experience for their students while everyone is also learning about each learner’s place.

**Methods**

**Data and Data Gathering**

The research was designed around post-secondary students who recently (within the past year) experienced place-based learning in their online education course, as well as the faculty/instructors who taught an online course that integrated place-based learning (also within the past year). Data was gathered from both the student and instructor populations so that a more diverse perspective could be achieved which, in turn, led to a more robust understanding of the impact that place-based learning has in online education.
For students and instructors to qualify as participants in this research, they had to have undertaken (or given, in the case of instructors) a place-based assignment as part of their online post-secondary course. This means that the assignment(s) integrated students getting out into their surrounding environment and/or community and used the experience as a part of their learning. It should be noted that in some cases faculty and students came from the same course, however there was also data collected from students and faculty from unrelated courses.

**Population 1 – Students**

Student participants came from post-secondary institutions in Canada, which included: Coast Mountain College, Mount Allison University, Royal Roads University, Thompson-Rivers University, and University of British Columbia. The courses they were enrolled in involved topics of literature, First Nations, and predominantly areas of study around the environment.

**Population 2 – Instructors**

The instructor participants came from post-secondary institutions across Canada, most of whom were teaching online for the first time (due to COVID-19 restrictions), while others were already experienced in the online delivery format that integrated place-based assignments. Participants were from: Mount Allison University, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Royal Roads University, Thompson-Rivers University, and the University of British Columbia. The courses they taught also involved literature, First Nations, sustainability, and education surrounding the outdoors and the environment.

**Data Collection**
Each student population was given an advert for the electronic survey which was often accompanied by a brief introduction to the research being conducted. This was provided to instructors to distribute to their class through their preferred method – mostly via email and/or posted on their online course module. The advert and introduction included a direct link to the survey for student participants to complete. The instructor population was emailed their own instructor-specific survey link and had already been familiarized with the research topic. In both the instructor and student surveys, the final question asked if they would like to participate in semi-structured interviews. For anybody that indicated ‘Yes’, they were then prompted to include their contact details and were contacted afterwards. The semi-structured interviews were arranged by email and/or phone to secure a date and time.

Collecting data through electronic surveys and semi-structured interviews allowed for a rich breadth of the human experience to be analyzed. Where the majority of survey questions were closed-ended and without much flexibility for responses, they were useful for disseminating to a large target audience instantly and for gathering information quickly. While surveys are valuable, they don’t build rapport with respondents or allow for question clarification. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to help dig deeper into the personal, subjective experiences. This allowed more elaboration in the responses due to the questions being open-ended and not limited to a survey text box (Jones, Baxter, & Khanduja, 2013).

With feelings and subjective experiences being difficult to express in an electronic survey, within the semi-structured interviews each person’s feelings regarding sense of place and community were verbally discussed with a focus on questioning if place-based
learning helped with feelings of isolation and disconnect. These discussions also offered the opportunity to elaborate on the individuals' own perceptions of *place* – whether it be their own or what was learned from their classmates.

It should be noted that Fraser (2016) used a method in his interviews called ‘critical incident technique’ (CIT) developed by Flanagan (1954). Fraser (2016) used CIT with students who experienced place-based learning to observe their behaviour by having participants describe their personal experiences and instances of feeling connected to place, which is similar to what was being sought in this study. CIT was fitting for the semi-structured interviews because Flanagan (1954) described it as helpful when collecting data from observations recounted from memory, it looks at subjective human experiences, and allows for flexibility to meet each specific situation (p. 335, 339).

Overall, there were 45 students and five faculty members who took the electronic surveys, along with four students and six faculty who participated in the semi-structured interview questions. The electronic surveys involved 16-20 questions and were a combination of mostly closed and some open-ended questions that explored the topics of online learning, isolation, and connections to *place*. The semi-structured interviews took between 30 minutes to one hour and were conducted via video conferencing platform, after which they transcribed and analyzed. Although the topics were the same, the perspectives sought from each population group was different, therefore the survey and interview questions for each population group varied.

The intent of this research was to build up a theory of understanding based on the data collected. The research looked to understand the direct, felt experience of participants, where their emotional, evaluative, and intuitive feelings are considered, as defined by
Downes (2000). Hence, a phenomenological approach was taken, which falls under a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm, where “knowledge is based on active experience” (Huang H.-M., 2002, pp. 28-29) and “all learning is an active process and all knowledge is unique to the individual” (Swan, 2005, p. 2), is also interpretive because it is based on individual perspectives and experiences, where each person interprets their learning differently.

The data collected is empirical because it was obtained through discussion and based on experiences. Where quantitative data is focused on the researcher's perspective, hard numbers, and testing a theory, this study gathered qualitative data to better understand the participant point of view. With participant feelings analyzed through interview conversation and the open-ended survey questions, an existing theory was not tested but rather had a new one emerge, where new insight was given on place-based learning in online post-secondary courses.

After the data was gathered from the surveys and the interviews transcribed, coding was done to categorize the data. The aforementioned critical incidents and experiences were examined to identify similarities, differences, and patterns that occurred. These categories were used to analyze both survey and interview data regarding students and faculty. Any emergent data outside of the pre-determined categories were also considered, since the study was qualitative and allowed for a certain degree of flexibility.

**Data Analysis**

The research found that place-based learning can indeed help to alleviate the isolation that students can feel in online learning environments, although place-based learning is not the sole contributor for this success: The level of peer-to-peer interactions
also played a role, where students felt the least lonely after they’d had interactions with their peers. Taking both these factors into consideration while analyzing the data, the themes that emerged were isolation, relationships, and connections to place. These three topics, while often interwoven with one another, were the strongest of what students indicated formed their experience. Further to this, in reflecting on their experience, almost all students indicated they enjoyed their place-based assignments, which is beneficial to creating engagement. Based on the three key themes identified, each one is expanded on below, with examples of the student experiences primarily investigated and some insights from faculty experiences are provided as well.

**Isolation**

The first notable theme, isolation, existed more so at the beginning of students’ courses than at the end. More than half (67%) of students surveyed responded “yes” and “somewhat” to feeling isolated at the beginning of their course, compared to only 13% who responded to feeling isolated by the end of their course. Although most students indicated they were familiar with taking online courses, students also said that getting out into their community and having interactions did have an impact on alleviating their loneliness. When interacting peer-to-peer activities were not a part of their course, students found themselves feeling isolated, and subsequently appreciated the push to create connections in their local community as an alternative. As one student said:

> It certainly was isolating in the way that I didn’t have a peer group to study with. I was actually going out in my community and making more local connections, and people were interested in the idea of studying the history of our local places. I did find a sort of study community locally.
It is interesting to note that as this student came to appreciate community members as her replacement-classmates, the community responded by wanting to be a part of the learning as well. Another student noted in her interview that, “I felt socially isolated from my peers, but I feel a sense of connection when I’m outdoors. Not with other people necessarily; just the sense of belonging and wholeness when I’m outdoors”. In her case, the online component of her course caused isolation and the connection to more-than-human elements lessened it.

Along with getting out into their communities, the opportunity for interaction played a large role in helping students feel less isolated. As the survey results indicated, students felt less isolated at the end of their course predominantly due to feeling more comfortable with online learning, getting to know their classmates better, and getting to know their community. Only two students indicated they felt more isolated; one of whom did express that getting out into their community was helpful in lessening their isolation, although this must not have made a significant impact overall.

From the faculty perspective, all faculty agreed by choosing either “yes” or “somewhat” that students seemed isolated at the beginning of their course, and conversely most faculty also indicated that students did not seem isolated by the end of their course. Therefore, it should be highlighted that in both the student and faculty surveys, a decrease in student isolation did take place. Similar to the student survey, most faculty agreed that their place-based assignments seemed helpful in reducing student isolation, however this was not the only factor either. In discussing the isolation of his students, one instructor observed that his students initially didn’t enjoy working on their own because they had become accustomed to relying on their instructors for all course direction (as can be
common in face-to-face classroom settings). Where these students voiced their discomfort and showed hesitation at the beginning of the course, they often followed-up with their instructor after the course, reminiscing and reflecting on their learning in a positive way because they gained a deeper understanding and connection to their local communities. A different instructor described this as providing students with freedom in their education and said, “I aim to emancipate learners in their learning. My place-based assignments invite emancipatory ways, as they are self/group directed”. Giving students the opportunity to be in charge of their own learning creates a constructivist environment where each student’s experience is individual and the instructor simply facilitates the process, also discussed in studies by Huang (2002) and Swan (2005). Another instructor, in lamenting the unexpected online shift of her course due to COVID-19, said, “I longed to be with them, and they longed to be together,” which showed that faculty too experienced the feeling of isolation. She further reflected on her students’ experience and explained that at an optional class online meeting, “One woman [student] just wanted to hang out; she was lonely. She just wanted to be with everyone and just sit there, quietly”. Providing the meeting space, albeit virtual, was helpful in minimizing students’ feelings of loneliness. As connecting as it can be to join in virtual meetings, 100% of faculty surveyed said they had challenges implementing place-based learning into their online course. One instructor wrote, “We have lost many of the cues we depend on to guide communication... it feels and is disconnected...digitally so,” which again shows that the sentiments faculty feel are also being echoed by students: Online learning can be very lonely.

**Relationships**
Relationships were defined through the surveys and interviews where sub-themes of human-to-human and more-than-human interactions arose, along with mentions of our relationship to the land and reconciliation. Some participants spoke strongly of how, through their place-based assignments, they’d become more perceptive to the Westernized persons’ dominance over other cultures, while other participants noticed the dominant relationship that humans have with nature, all of which found that reconnection to place and reconciliation is ever so important. “This is my community but we’re on stolen land . . . there’s all this stuff that I didn’t understand before,” commented one student who undertook a self-led research project on a local Indigenous site. “It’s made me a lot more aware of our colonial views. And, it has unsettled me . . . I certainly am more committed to reconciliation, officially. I love my property, I love my land, but is it my land?” she questions. In learning about the local site she was able to gain appreciation and compassion for its Indigenous history, where her research led her to the museum, two community libraries, and the Indigenous band office through which she established a number of new connections in the community. In a different course, another student decided to study a plant she’d often noticed in her region, the camas flower. Through her place-based assignment she discovered the cultural and historical relationship that the camas flower has for the local Songhees First Nation and that it thrives in the Garry oak ecosystems that are prevalent in her area. In her interview she elaborates on the newfound more-than-human relationship she discovered between her surroundings, and then felt for herself, where she became a part of the relationship too:

It really spoke to the meaning of these places that I go all the time. I see the flowers and I see those trees, but I didn't understand the relationship and the context to the
people who have lived with these plants . . . . It gave me this new connection and insight.

These student experiences offer an understanding of how place-based learning helped them build relationships – whether they were with other members of their community or with more-than-human beings of plants and animals.

In one of the interviews, a faculty member was acutely cognizant of our human dominance in the world and focuses her teachings on place in how, similar to Buber’s I-thou relationship, there is the need for us to shift our perception of superiority to one that treats the natural world as an equal:

It’s a crisis of perception that we could ever be separate from the rest of the world, that we could be better than and dominant. When I say “pivot,” I mean the pivot from dominator to defender. From colonialist to community member. From looking at nature and looking into it. Speaking about nature or speaking with it, with a conscious awareness. From manipulating to participating.

Through her and other instructors’ place-based assignments, they aim to engage students with nature so that an appreciation to place can occur, forming a long-lasting relationship with the regions they have familiarized themselves with. As Gruenewald and Smith (2014) explained, students should be “less focused on the conquest and consumption of places than on the building of relationship and personal meaning” (p. 2). This personal meaning again draws on Buber’s I-thou relationship and can lead to environmental stewardship, commitment, and rootedness to place – shaping the person that can in turn shape it.
Another facet of the relationship theme that became very present in the student survey was the student-to-student relationships that arose due to interactions. There were 13% of students who reported their course didn’t involve any interactions. Some of their feedback had negative connotations with them saying, “Sadly, I have not interacted with the other students,” “I learned very little about other places,” and “I’m worried now I misses [sic] something”. In contrast, for the students whose courses did involve interactions with their classmates despite being geographically distanced from one another, in sharing their knowledge with classmates online, the most prevalent part of place they learned about was what other places looked like visually. Examples of students positively summarizing their experiences in the survey included, “My interactions with my community were not only what reduced my isolation. It was more so because of what my classmates and I shared about those community interactions afterwards that made a bigger difference,” and “It felt like they were with me all day for two weeks. I was alone where I was but was not at all lonely”. This shows that where students were able to build relationships with each other, it was helpful in reducing their isolation and furthered their learning about places beyond their own region.

Lastly, a faculty member shared that her place-based assignments helped students build relationships closer to home – with their families: “One student took her cousins out to do many of the activities that I had designed. Another activity was learning to tie several knots . . . so one student’s brother was a fisher . . . he was coaching her on the knots.” It is interesting to observe that because students couldn’t work physically with each other, they instead used their familial relationships and subsequently expanded the reach of who was
involved in the learning. This is similar to how community members became involved in student learning and helped diminish isolation.

**Connection to Place**

The third prominent theme that arose alongside isolation and its near opposite – relationships, was connection to *place*. Most students said they did feel a sense of connection to their community and local surroundings due to their course requiring them to do work that was away from their computer. And although most student respondents (78%) had already thought about their own community/region, 83% now think differently about a specific place and/or what *place* means to them. It should also be highlighted that 76% now care more about their community/regions due to their course.

In reviewing the open-ended student survey responses and listening to their interviews, a consistent factor that repeatedly arose was their appreciation to have the time to observe and reflect their local area. Because taking time to observe their *place* is not something they would normally make a point of doing, it allowed them to consciously consider their space without rushing through, essentially connecting them to their surroundings. In speaking about this, one student poignantly elaborated:

I visited an elder in my home village who is almost 90 years old, we had tea and talked about the state of the world and the history of Hazelton, B.C. This really made me appreciate these kinds of moments and the wisdom offered by elders. We live in a fast-paced world and often don’t "have time" to reflect like this. This is needed like the air we breathe.

Other students gave responses that further echoed the bond they felt to their surroundings due to their assignments, such as “I felt more connected to my local
surroundings as we are asked once a week to . . . reflect on that week’s course content. It is nice taking the time to slow down and notice what’s going on around us,” and “I felt more connection to my community because after I did the online research, to actually go to the place I was writing about made me more aware of the ‘sense of place’ that I couldn't get from the internet”. This latter quote is a good example where the information couldn’t merely be read, but instead had to be seen, felt, and experienced firsthand to gain understanding. Another student, who had lived in their local area for a few years, spoke about having their experiences become more meaningful for them, where “I was already connected but it led me to reflect more on my experiences here”. These reflections help students gain a rootedness to their communities; it gives them the time to notice, ponder, and appreciate their surroundings. Ultimately, they transition from having a transactional relationship to forming a meaningful connection with their environment, whether natural or man-made, whether human or more-than-human.

Conversely, the place-based assignments didn’t gain a positive reaction from everyone. One student remarked, “Actually I had not considered the origin of parks, so I would not say I felt more connected but frustrated at the history I discovered in my learnings”. The message of the lesson, however, was undeniably learnt and it could be argued that the lesson would not be as effective if it was simply read from a textbook. Gruenewald and Smith (2014) reiterate this in speaking about place-based learning in education: “Sometimes this awareness leads to a decolonization, that is, coming to understand and resist the ideas and forces that allow for the privileging of some people and the oppression of others – human and other-than-human” (p. viii). Even if the learning is not positive, coming to these understandings of our dominance is still constructive to
understand place. The understandings, despite being borne out of lack of knowledge or even ignorance, can lead to a commitment of betterment, care, and responsibility to place, ultimately affecting and changing our self.

**Discussion**

The findings of the research reveal that online learning in post-secondary education can benefit from place-based learning integrated into its courses because it is tied to students’ well-being and to the well-being of their surroundings. Answering the first research question of “How can post-secondary online education use place-based learning to create human and more-than-human connections to place?”, faculty were able to successfully implement a variety of place-based assignments into their online courses where students found both types of connections within their surroundings, ultimately connecting them to place. The second research question articulated, “In what ways does place-based learning alleviate online learners’ isolation and disconnection from their local communities?”, similarly found that because of the place-based assignments, isolation did alleviate due to the interactions that occurred, which led to relationships with humans and more-than-human entities. These results are both in line with Buber’s I-thou relationship (1923/1927); using place-based learning enabled nature to become a vocal Other in the student learning experience.

With place-based learning being helpful in online education because it creates physical interactions, it is not the only factor for successfully relieving student feelings of isolation: Online interactions play a key role too. As other literature has shown that interaction and sense of community in online learning can decrease feelings of isolation and separation (Croxton, 2014; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Kim & Yuan, 2014; McInnerney
& Roberts, 2004, Rovai, 2002), interactions outside of the online community have proved to be effective as well. From the research in this study, both students and faculty strongly indicated that student isolation decreased as their course progressed, and this was namely due to the interactions that took place – both in getting to know their classmates online as well as their geographic community offline. In two studies that compared on- and off-campus student experiences and examined their social isolation perceptions, it was found that on-campus students were generally less isolated than their off-campus counterparts. However, in both studies isolation was still noted for on-campus students if social interaction and communication were low (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Irani, Wilson, Slough, & Reiger, 2014). Pairing these understandings with the findings of this current study, it shows that learning can be isolating regardless of classes being face-to-face or online; if there is minimal interaction, students will feel isolated (see Appendix A). In contrast, this study has also demonstrated that online learning can be connecting if it integrates place-based learning because it encourages interaction with place. And so, in the same way that face-to-face learning allows for interactions with students’ surrounding peers, interactions can happen in online learning too, and it can be helpful to encourage assignments away from the computer. In all these settings, whether inside with classmates or outside with place-based learning, connections are able to form (see Appendix A).

With place-based learning in online education showing that it does lead to more opportunities for interactions where students form connections and relationships, we can now understand that it is a valid method that aids to reduce isolation. With reduced isolation, we can surmise that integrating place-based learning into online courses could potentially lead to less drop-out and attrition rates. Due to the limitations of this study
however, further research is needed to establish if there is correlation between the two factors.

With further regard to the results of this study, the three primary themes of isolation, relationships, and connection to place that arose through the research can be viewed as a process (see Appendix B) where many student learners begin their online course journey feeling isolated and alone. Then, by integrating place-based learning assignments and opportunities that encourage interactions, the isolation lessens and relationships (human and/or more-than-human) form. Lastly, the relationships that students develop lead to strong or stronger ties with their local communities and to care more about their region, enhancing the well-being of their place. This is Gruenewald and Smith’s (2014) message as well, where creating place-consciousness benefits people immediately and long-term. Of the students interviewed, many spoke about a critical incident or event that shaped their connection to place. For most, it was their assignments that required taking time to reflect on their area and making efforts to understand it more deeply. Students were able to identify particular moments where they gained a strong sense of place and found a greater sense of awareness and openness to the connections that nature brought them. These can be summarized as constructivist experiences, where each student had subjective learning based on their individual encounters, and have been identified as important life-experience events by Dewey (1966), Huang (2002), Swan (2005), and others. What this study further showed was that despite their differing experiences, if students were able to share their knowledge of place with one-another, then their peers could become bonded that place as well, expanding the range of appreciation. Therefore, for a richer learning community to be achieved, it is essential that participation
from both faculty and students is contributed to their online course platforms to fully understand each other’s experiences and places.

**Conclusion**

We need to rediscover how to be sustainable. To move from being apart from nature, to becoming a part of nature once again.

–David Attenborough, *A Life on our Planet*

This study used place-based learning as a means to address the issue of student isolation that exists in online learning while acting as a link to bond learners to place and community. The need for interactions remains strong as students were content to have interactions online with their peers and instructors, as well as settings beyond their online modules, such as with community members, in nature, community locations, venues, and even their own backyard. As an alternative for students trying to create a connection with their geographically distanced classmates, place-based learning has proved to be a decent replacement, especially in courses where peer-to-peer interactions may not be able to occur. This new ground for place in online learning is still able to hold the notion of environmental stewardship that Buber (1923/1927), Gruenewald and Smith (2014), Fraser (2016), Knapp (2005), Williams and Snively (2016), and so many other place supporters promote. Adding place-based learning to online education is an opportunity for students to have connection, kinship, and communication opportunities within their local environment, whether this be with other people or more-than-human elements; it has proved to be another way to mitigate the isolation that is often felt when learning via distance. Furthermore, students found enjoyment in their place-based assignments, which enables them to be engaged, active participants in their learning. For instructors and
course designers, the implications of this research can help improve student experiences in online courses and gives them another tool to lessen student isolation. To foster the relationships students build and their connections to place, having a space to share within their online platform can facilitate all participants to learn about each other’s place, strengthening the wellness of many students and communities.
References


Retrieved from The Rural School and Community Trust:
http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=3105


Appendix A

Figure 1

*Student Experience in Relation to Course Type and Place-Based Learning Implementation*

Note: “Outside” symbolizes place-based learning assignments while “Inside” does not.
Appendix B

Figure 2

*Place-Based Learning Process for Students in Online Courses*

Note: This figure depicts the student experience in an online course when place-based learning is implemented.