

## What the Yurt? Round Teaching and Architecture as Pedagogy

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Exploring built pedagogy, one college set out to disrupt structure and create a community of research by erecting a teaching lab yurt and inviting faculty to create a cohort of action researchers teaching in the yurt. The round shape of the yurt facilitated a more democratized learning environment where students found themselves a greater part of the learning and experienced their instructors to be positioned, literally, as facilitators of learning rather than keepers of the knowledge, where student accountability was inherent and an auditory/experiential connection to the world beyond the classroom created “aliveness” in learning.

*“We shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us.”*

– Winston Churchill

Structural disruption lies at the core of one college’s efforts to change the architecture of teaching and learning and to create a community of research. As Orr (2004) states, “It is paradoxical that buildings on college and university campuses, places of intellect, characteristically show so little thought, imagination, sense of place, ecological awareness, and relation to any larger pedagogical intent” (p. 112). And yet, architecture is pedagogical. We need to recognize that the learning environment is the third teacher (Fraser, 1994). Orr (2004) further suggests that we should ask

what makes a place a good educational environment? How might the typical classroom be altered to encourage ecological awareness, creativity, responsiveness, and civility? How might materials, light, sounds, water, spatial configuration, openness, scenery, colours, textures, plants, and animals be combined to enhance the range and depth of learning? (p. 115).

With these questions in mind and the Big Hairy Audacious Goal (Collins & Porras, 1994) to become the college of choice for experiential place-based learning, Coast Mountain College created its teaching lab yurt. Once described as “an architectural wonder” by Architectural Digest, these circular homes, also known as a Ger, is a traditional dwelling in Mongolia and neighbouring areas, having been used for thousands of years (Pacific Yurts, n.d.). A yurt, from Pacific Yurts, was chosen to invite some structural disruption to the learning process for five reasons. First, physical shape directs usage. Designs for classrooms tell us about how educative efforts are meant to happen (McClintock & McClintock, 1968). A yurt is round, lending itself easily to active, participatory learning.

Second, the yurt stands out as different, which creates intrigue and invites users out of their comfort zones to help facilitate experimentation with teaching and learning. As Ellsworth (2005) says, “Creating room for speculation enables an educator to explore her understanding of the places in which people encounter

enjoyable learning experiences and the means through which she, as an educator, could imagine making and using such places” (p. 9).

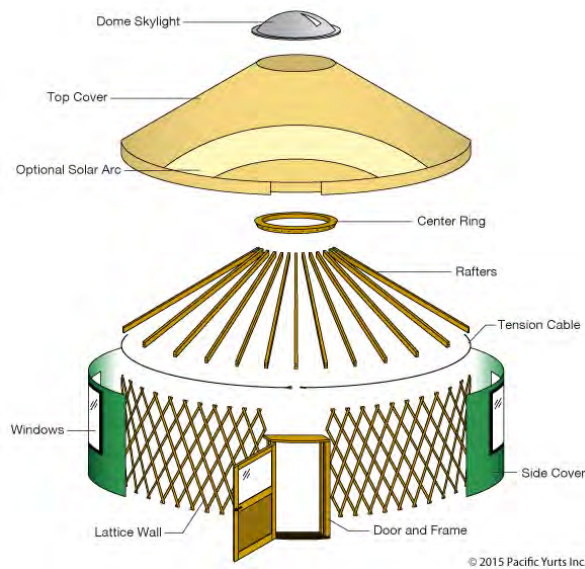
Third, as places of higher education look to decolonize, consideration must be taken as to how our literal structures promote or dismantle colonization. “Engaging in education to challenge practices of cultural exclusion is complicated” (Iseke-Barnes, 2008, p. 133); however, as Christopher Day points out, “the environment has the ability to influence on the way we think, the way we feel and the way we act” (Shmis, Kotnik, & Ustinova, 2014, p. 42). It follows, then, that reshaping space provides opportunity to challenge typical exclusionary practices. Decolonizing involves addressing thoughts, feelings, actions, and structures that uphold one way of being over another. Circular spaces, through their very shape, provide opportunity for different ways of being, teaching, and learning.

Fourth, the yurt, as a permeable classroom, can promote connection to place. “People are capable of perceiving places and learning from that direct experience [and thus] our ability to perceive places can be either thwarted or fostered by educational experience” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 625). As Casey (1997) states:

To be at all-to exist in any way-is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and though them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact? (p. ix in Gruenewald, 2003, p. 622)

Places shape people whether recognized and acknowledged or not. “As centers of experience, places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, places make us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621).

**Figure 1**  
*What Makes a Yurt a Yurt?*



Pacific Yurts (2015). *What is a yurt?* <https://www.yurts.com/what-is-a-yurt/>. Copyright by Pacific Yurts.

The yurt serves as a learning environment that increases awareness of place. It is not a classroom or learning that could exist anywhere. Unlike a Starbucks, that creates a manufactured, similar experience no matter where it is located, the yurt is responsive to its place with its permeable walls, making each moment of learning influenced by the environment in variable ways, encouraging hearing, communicating, and “meaning making with our places on the living earth” (Berry, 1988 in Gruenewald, 2003, p. 624). Finally, the yurt is a visual artefact that signifies intentions to move towards

experiential place-based learning and do education different as a college. The purpose of the teaching lab yurt is to provide a place for inspiration and innovation to promote and elevate teaching and learning. Here, faculty are invited and supported to explore experiential place-based ways of designing curriculum, delivering instruction, and assessing learning.

This paper recounts learnings from a collaborative action research project in the teaching lab yurt. Two questions undergird this research: (a) how do shapes shape teaching and learning; and, (b) what comes of collaborating on research as a group of faculty? To answer these questions, a cohort of instructors from Coast Mountain College engaged in a community of research, undertaking parallel action research projects and connecting as a community to share reflections. As educators, so often we are engaged in all kinds of doing. Every class is an experiment if we are willing to approach our teaching with a learning spirit. We experiment when we change the seating, alter an introduction to a new unit, shift a class from lecture to team-based learning, and so forth. It seems, at times, that it is easier to be engaged in this doing but much harder to formalize this experimenting into a scholarly inquiry formal research structure. Faculty pursued scholarly inquiry in a community of research, with ten faculty in total - representing biology, trades (automotive), geography, social work, early childhood care and education, business, and geoscience - participating together over the course of three semesters. These faculty all taught at least one semester long course in the teaching lab yurt with the intention of answering the question of how space affects teaching and learning. As part of their efforts to answer this question, they each chose ways to document their answers, gathering monthly to share insights with one another.

**Figure 2**  
*The Teaching Lab Yurt*



Coast Mountain College (2017, October). *Introducing ‘The Teaching Lab’ in COLTs Yurt Classroom.* <https://tinyurl.com/yurt-classroom>. Copyright by Coast Mountain College.

### Method

There are two approaches utilized to explore the research questions in this scholarly teaching project: (a) pebble project and (b) round teaching. The pebble project approach is scholarly inquiry in the form of asking one question and/or doing one thing different to create a ripple effect of influence on student learning. What sets the pebble project apart from much scholarly inquiry is the idea of each instructor identifying or enacting their “pebble” within a community of research, meaning a committed group of faculty that meets regularly to share insights and efforts to create change.

Round teaching gives nod to the college’s new “teaching lab” yurt that is circular, which stands in contrast to the traditional four-walled classroom spaces found on campus. The hope was to discover ways in which round teaching influenced students’ learning and learning experience as well as effects on teaching. To measure impact, each instructor created an action research project, which is a process through which instructors examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully. It is based on the following assumptions: (a) Instructors work best on problems they have self-identified and (b) instructors become more effective when encouraged to examine and assess their own work and then consider ways of working differently (Rehn, 2016).

This method of measurement asked instructors to be the researchers; rather than study something “out there”, instructors study themselves as they attempt to answer research questions they have about instructing in the round learning space of the yurt. The instructors had to apply to be part of the yurt teaching cohort. The application included a commitment to pursuing some form of new knowledge and to share their learnings with peers and others. They

1. worked under the broad banner of the research question “how does space effect teaching and learning” and occasionally branched off into a more detailed research question based on their own curiosity;
2. explored what the broader literature has to say about our question;
3. systematically collected data in a number of ways to explore how space shapes teaching and learning, such as documenting with video or photos of students engaged in learning in an active manner, keeping a reflective journal, holding a focus group with students for reflection, or including questions regarding the yurt on course evaluations;
4. shared and discussed data and research methodology with fellow instructors/researchers;

5. analyzed and interpreted data with the support of colleagues and faculty developers from the Centre of Learning Transformation; and
6. shared findings with students, colleagues, and members of the educational community in some distributable manner, including conference presentations and research papers.

Instructors were given the following prompts for developing their action research question. They did not have to ask the same thing, nor did they have to capture data in the same way. There was a lot of latitude given to instructors to choose what they would try, observe, capture, and reflect.

- I would like to improve...
- I am perplexed by...
- I am really curious about...
- I want to learn more about...
- An idea I would like to try out in my class is...
- Something I think would really make a difference is...
- Something I’d like to change is...

The research cohort of ten instructors represented 10% of teaching staff at the college, also representing a breadth that categorically reaches more than half of programming areas at the college. The cohort met four times over the course of a semester to share reflections. The first meeting was an orientation to teaching in the yurt, including the technology, which was a Big Touch™ from In Focus and the use of flexible furniture (tables on wheels that are white board surfaces and chairs on wheels). The second and third meetings focused on how the yurt was shaping the teaching, and the final meeting focused on the student learning experience. Two faculty developers worked to support the cohort and gather their reflections. Each instructor also had at least one 1:1 meeting with a faculty developer as well. Instructors shared their reflections and data with the cohort, including the faculty developers from the College’s Centre of Learning Transformation (COLT). These reflections and data were analyzed by COLT staff for themes that were then brought back to the cohort for discussion and refinement.

### Findings, Discussion, and Implications

Three themes emerged regarding how the space effected teaching and learning: equality, accountability, and permeability.

#### Equality

Students found that the round shape of the learning environment had positive effects in disrupting the typical hierarchy that exists in a classroom. In any classroom, there is an inherent positionality structure that places people in different spots with power implications. In any

learning space you enter, consider where the power resides. In a typical classroom, power often exists at the front of the classroom, which is often where the instructor is located. In contrast, the front of class does not exist in a round teaching space. The power, it would seem, is either centrally located or peripherally located which changes the dynamic and student experience to be more inclusive and democratic. Students noticed how their instructors felt like one of the group and were more like facilitators than usual in this environment and how both the students themselves and the instructors felt more a part of the learning.

The instructors conveyed that this shift was also felt by them. One instructor said it was like the gravitational pull of the space was to the center and/or periphery rather than the front. This shift did change the classroom dynamics and did require different attention to relationality from the instructors. In one case, a student from the group of automotive students remarked that the group did seem to get along better in the yurt. In another case, an instructor, identifiably constructivist already in her approach to teaching, experienced a level of depth previously unexperienced, with the growth of her students accompanied by a tremendous amount of traversing personal narratives and landscapes. This required her, as instructor, to hold space for so much more than usual.

The facilitative approach to teaching, rather than a transmission approach, fostered in the round space had big implications. One instructor commented that he had this great 150 slide deck for one class and only got through three slides. He was both aghast and delighted. Students were so engaged in the learning that content coverage took a hit, yet, in his view, learning increased. The aghast reaction regarded his feeling that it had been a waste of time to put together the slide deck in the first place. Another instructor found teaching in the yurt less work on the instructor side as students were filling class with their questions and input, while a different instructor found it more work to create classes that involved students to a higher degree.

### **Accountability**

Related to the shift in location of power, we found that round teaching inherently increases student accountability. Students noticed that there was “no corner to hide in” and “no back of the class to loaf in.” Even arriving late felt worse to students as there was no way to do so discreetly. Additionally, being checked out

of the learning is more difficult in a round learning space because every single learner is front and center. This is a strength and a challenge for both learners and instructors. It did invite students to step out of their comfort zones, voice their opinions, and get to know one another. However, adapting to being consistently present to the learning is demanding of students. As well, for more introverted students or reluctant learners, there is no place to find relief. One student noted that the more intimate setting was exciting and intimidating. Instructors needed to keep these strengths and challenges in mind and provide opportunity for relief from the “exposure” through movement, smaller group work, and breaking up sustained circle engagement, while taking hold of the opportunity of students that were more accountable to the learning.

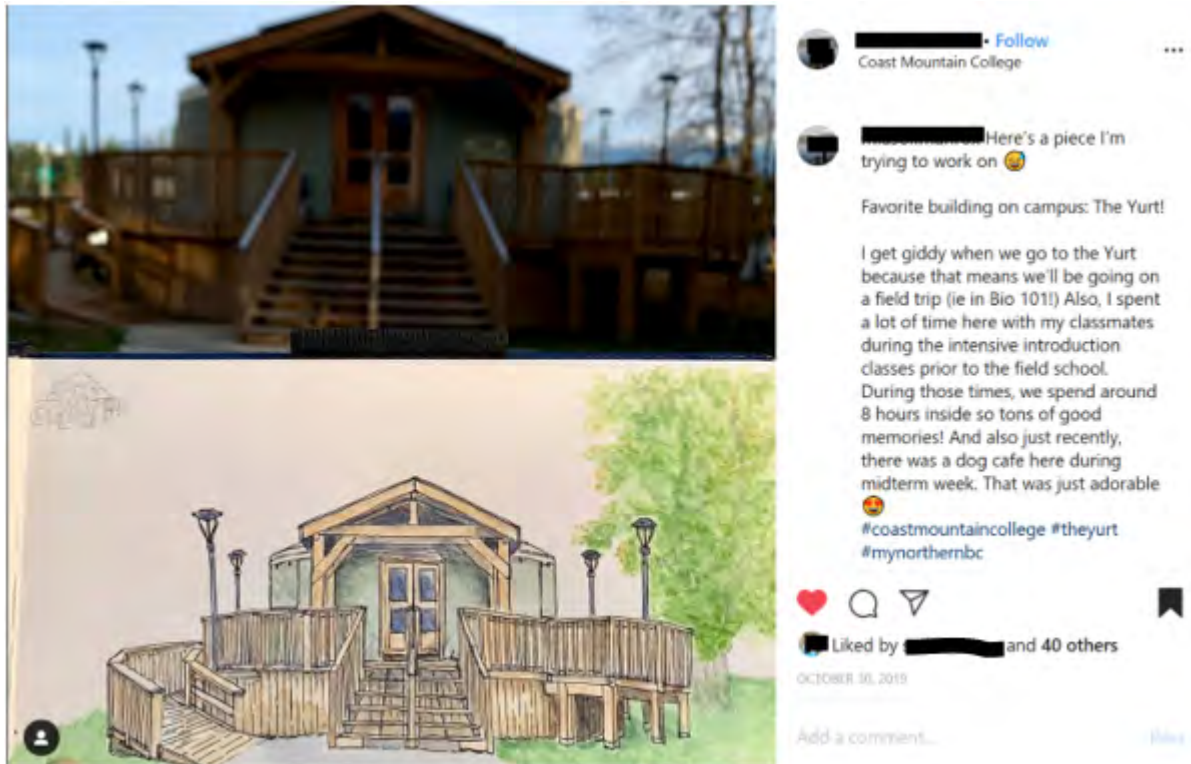
A student recounted an instructor dividing her class into groups and then assigning each group a corner to work in. Students quickly piped up that there were no corners. This provided some laughter and reflection on how mental models change slowly. Even in a space with no corners or straight walls, we can still get caught thinking as though there are. This space disrupted the typical classroom structure, but instructors and students all had to do further work to adapt to this new shape.

### **Permeability**

The yurt is a tent. Its walls are made of vinyl fabric. Sound permeates the learning space. Birds calling or rain on the roof were amplified in this learning environment. So were the sounds of snow removal and traffic. Some students mentioned finding this distracting, but many noted that the permeability contributed to a “peaceful and energetic” learning environment with some of the sound being “relaxing and soothing.” Additionally, between the skylight, windows, and fabric, natural light is typically sufficient and adds to the ambience rather than the typical glare of fluorescents. A student mentioned that the yurt was calming and that their mood and marks both were improved, while another student called it a healing environment. Yet another student said,

I enjoyed the yurt learning environment because it was a more vivid experience and very interactive. Most classes indoors are boring and tend to provoke sleepiness, while the yurt keeps me awake. It is not necessarily the teaching style present that I enjoy but the environment in which it takes place.

Interestingly, it was the yurt identified as keeping the student awake.

**Figure 3***A Student's Instagram Post*

Nolan, Carrie [@cadeega]. (2019, October 31). Here's a piece I'm trying to work on. Favorite building on campus: The Yurt! [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/cadeega/>

Instructors also found the environment in the yurt conducive to an enjoyable teaching and learning experience. One instructor commented that teaching in the yurt was the most field school-like experience he had found teaching in a classroom. He was referring to the closeness and connections that typically develop during immersion studies. Another instructor said she noticed that in typical classrooms students would arrive with ear buds in place until instruction began. In the yurt, she observed students removing ear buds as soon as they arrived, entering into conversations with one another before class began. The environment was inviting different behaviours than typical in traditional classrooms. You can see from a student Instagram post below, where the student did a drawing of the yurt, that she also identified a correlation between field based studies and learning in the yurt and said that, even with 8-hour class session in there, there were good memories. There is, of course, a direct correlation as many of our field courses start and end in the yurt, but it is more than that correlation. The light, sound, permeability, and space create a connection to and awareness of the natural

world in a way that counters the typical isolating structures we teach and learn within.

### Community of Research

In addition to the themes that emerged regarding the teaching and learning experience of round space, this research was also an experiment in a community of research with a pebble project approach. Instructors studied their own teaching by doing one small thing different and shared their reflections with one another on a regular basis. One outcome from this approach was that doing one thing different sometimes sparked changes elsewhere. Instructors reshaped their other spaces by changing desks from rows to U shapes or circles as possible. This approach also reduced disciplinary silos by generating conversation amongst a breadth of departments. As well, sharing with one another helped shape our understandings of how shapes shape teaching and learning. It was an umbrella over the individual process that created a collective experience and understanding which could prove very useful to other

institutions and groups of faculty.

### Conclusion

The idea behind this action research project has been to explore built pedagogy – how shape shapes learning. The pebble project approach, doing one thing different, and reflecting together as a cohort of faculty both served to achieve two things. First, faculty formalized experimentation with their teaching, articulating this action research orientation in a new way, with themselves. Second, doing so within a cohort led to creation of a community of practice where thoughts, ideas, and learnings were tried out, stretched, and firmed up in the presence of peers. This connected approach, as opposed to a typically isolated approach, to research led to stronger outcomes in the learning and stronger bonds amongst faculty. These connections will bear fruit in an ongoing manner. The round shape of the yurt facilitated a more democratized learning environment where students found themselves a greater part of the learning and experienced their instructors to be positioned, literally, as facilitators of learning rather than keepers of the knowledge, where student accountability was inherent and an auditory/experiential connection to the world beyond the classroom created “aliveness” in learning. Given the generally positive feedback about learning in a round space and that not all our classrooms are yurts, we must consider how our learning environments are shaped and design them to consider equality, accountability, and permeability.

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