

"Place Based Tourism Curriculum: making connections to community"

Robin Reid, Thompson Rivers University

Abstract

Drawing from a research project with the Thompson Rivers University (TRU) and from place based curriculum and literature, this paper explores the effectiveness of a student-created half hour walking tour and postcard assignment as a way of deepening student engagement with course content and the local community. The project was designed to engage travelers and locals in the Kamloops landscape. This paper explores how the project was able to extend the learning community beyond the parameters of the university and bring both international and domestic students into public space and onto the local landscape

Introduction:

In the fall of 2012 I joined the Thompson Rivers University (TRU) Pedagogy of Place Group, which consists of ten faculty members from various disciplines. We came together as a learning community to explore the effectiveness of place based teaching and learning and to assess whether a common "place based" assignment could deepen student engagement with course content and connect students to the community where they live and study. As a group we decided that each of us would create an assignment that used postcards as a medium of expression that would connect course content to place. The title of this research project is "Postcards from the classroom: Do place-based assignment increase student engagement across disciplines? Students in biology, tourism, Anthropology, Geography, History and English were required to complete a postcard assignment. Each assignment was different, designed to meet the different learning objectives in each course. Once the courses were completed, students were invited to participate in the research by way of questionnaires, an interview, and were asked to submit their final work for analysis or display.

As a faculty member in the Tourism Management department, I had been engaged in place based research within a tourism context and I was exploring ways for students to make a connection between the theoretical content of the course and the local landscape of Kamloops. A third year course entitled "Community and Cultural Issues in Tourism" in the Bachelor of Tourism Management at TRU seemed like the ideal course in which to explore these connections. I introduced students to the theoretical context of place in the tourism literature. For example, seminal authors such as Edward Relph (1976) suggest that tourists are rarely inclined to develop a "sense of place" in relation to the destinations that they visit because of the superficial nature of their experiences, the short amount of time they spend in one place and the tendency of the tourism industry to present 'Disneyfied' landscapes devoid of deeper meaning (Hinch and Higham, 2004; Bryman, 2004). This perspective fits into a broader discourse of modern day mass tourism as a hallmark of globalization (Jaworski and Pritchard 2005; Clifford, 1997; Salazar, 2010), which also includes commodification of local cultures, landscapes,

products and experiences. Most locations around the world are, to some degree, drawn into the global production of goods, services, and experiences. However, there is also a desire to make sense of global themes at a local level (Salazar, 2010). Thus, one response to globalization has been a renewed interest in connection to place through alternative and sustainable forms of tourism.

Within the context of my community and cultural class we explored the questions of "how do we engage tourists in the local landscapes they visit?" What role do stories of place play in creating connections to the tourist experience and the people and landscapes they visit? Stories of place are also relevant for locals to connect with their own communities and the narratives of the landscapes they pass through on a daily basis. Lucy Lippard (1997) observes that "travel is the only context in which people ever look around. If we spent half the energy looking at our own neighbourhoods we'd probably learn twice as much" (pg.13). The assignment for this course was also tailored to include locals as tourists.

The Assignment:

The students were introduced to an online document entitled "Sense of Place: An Interpretive Planning Handbook" edited by Carter (2001) and published in electronic format on the website of the Scottish Interpretation Network (www.scotinterpnet.org.uk). Carter (2001) describes interpretation as:

part of how we manage and understand our heritage - a wide ranging term which can include the songs and stories of an area, the grassy knolls marking the site of pre-historic settlements, the industries which give life to a town, or the mosses growing in an oak wood. Whatever it is, heritage is conserved because someone thinks it is important. Interpretation is a way of helping others appreciate that importance (pg:4)

With this document as a reference, students were required to create a half hour walking tour in downtown Kamloops as a way to engage tourists and locals in the landscape. The primary objective was that students would think about place critically and creatively and be able to ask questions about spending time in place, as locals and as tourists.

Inspiration for this assignment came from previous volunteer experience I had with the Kamloops Downtown Business Association and the Rocky Mountaineer Company- Rocky Mountaineer provides guests with a variety of high quality holiday rail packages in Western Canada. On routes through the Canadian Rocky Mountains to the West coast there are overnight stops in Kamloops. The Kamloops Downtown Business Association offers free one-hour evening tours specifically for the Rocky Mountaineer rail passengers. The tours are meant to engage tourists with the historical and cultural landscape of the area with particular emphasis on the architecture and stories of selected sites in downtown Kamloops.

Additionally, I participated in a number of walking tours offered by the Kamloops museum and I realized that walking tours would be an effective way to connect the theoretical content of the course to the local landscape, and provide a platform for the "postcards from home" component of the assignment. One of the tour guides from the museum volunteered to take my class on a half hour walking tour through downtown Kamloops. The tour guide's intent was to give students a sample of a tour, and to highlight how she goes about finding and disseminating the historical, cultural and geographical content she selects for her tours. Students

were also introduced to the resources available to them at the Kamloops museum and archives. The outcome of this connection to the archives was twofold. First, many of the students were not familiar with the archives and had never considered using this resource for primary research. Second, I received an email from an employee at the Museum and archives thanking me for introducing the students to the collection. He mentioned that few students from the university, particularly from the tourism programs, are using the archives for research. Building a stronger partnership between TRU and the museum and archives was a beneficial outcome of this assignment and speaks to ways in which place-based pedagogy can connect theoretical concepts of academia to the lived experiences of the local community.

The assignment was a large part of the course evaluation and was broken down into three segments; the post card 10%, the interpretive tour 15% and the written description of the tour and reflection 15%. For the interpretive tour the students were given the link to Carter, J. (2001) *Sense of Place: An Interpretive Planning handbook* as a guide for them to use in developing their tour. For the postcard, students were required to create a single postcard with images that reflected the theme of the tour and details of the location, time and cost of the tour. The intent was that the postcard could be placed at the Kamloops Visitor center as a souvenir of Kamloops and provide information about an interpretive tour the students had created.

At the end of the term students were required to show the postcard they created at the beginning of the tour presentation and then again at the end of the tour presentation to gain feedback from the class as to whether their postcard achieved the intended goal of creating interest in taking the tour. Both the interpretive tour and the post card act as agents of place making in that they both inscribe narratives of place on the landscape. In addition to providing a creative and theoretical connection to place, this place based assignment provided a platform for international and domestic students to share their experiences of spending time in place as locals and as tourists. According to the preliminary results from student interviews, most of the students said that they learned a lot about Kamloops through their own research as well as listening to the presentations by other students and they enjoyed interacting with the community to obtain information for their projects.

Outcomes:

The students worked in groups of three to four and presented their tour in class through video clips of their tour or slides of their tour subjects. The student tours were focused on the downtown areas of Kamloops or the areas around Thompson Rivers University. There were no geographic parameters and students were free to choose the places they wished to engage. The tours developed by the students were wide ranging and impressive. They ranged from an historical campus tour of TRU; a Kamloops community and cultural tour which began at the art gallery and ended at a local pub; a tour of Kamloops sporting facilities in the downtown centre that support Kamloops brand as "Canada's Tournament Capital"; a tour of painted murals in the downtown area entitled " Kamloops Hidden Art Projects"; two other tours used the theme of the South and North Thompson Rivers, as a geographical and cultural meeting place, significant to both the Secwepemc First Nations people and colonial development of Kamloops.

Another group, in which all the students were female, created a walking tour that highlighted the important role of women's groups such as the Afternoon Auxiliary to Royal Inland Hospital and the Women's Christian Temperance Union in conjunction with the Red Cross to bring together all classes of those in need and all denominations during the war years.

The students wanted to show both tourists and locals how the west end of Kamloops can be seen as much more than just a place for buildings, restaurant and shopping; it can also be seen as a place where fundamental societal changes occurred; where women broke social and economic barriers and did so while helping others in need. During their presentation of the tour to the class they mentioned that "as women themselves, they connected to the theme of commemorating women's groups in Kamloops that contributed to improving community life and the wellbeing of individuals in need" (student quote, 2012).

Perhaps one of the most unexpected connections to place came from a tour created by a group of three students from China. These students created a walking tour that focused on the history of the Chinese railway workers in the development of Canada's National Railway. During their research, they discovered that some of the Chinese rail workers were from their home town in China.

As for the postcards, some students spent a great deal of time on the composition of the postcards which resulted in creative and engaging interpretations of the local landscape. In Figure 1 the students are seen standing in front of a mural painted near the back wall of an Italian grocery store in downtown Kamloops. The theme of this tour is to introduce murals painted in back alleys as hidden works of art.

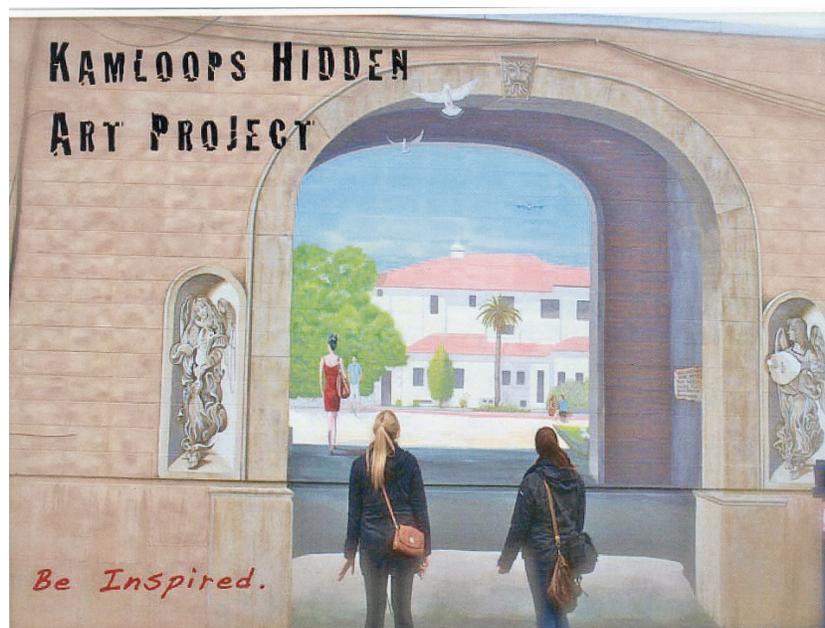


Figure 1: Student postcard, 2012. (with permission)

While some students selected one colorful image as representative of the main theme of their tour others selected black and white images to reflect the historical connection to place. The group celebrating the women's contribution to community during the war years selected a nostalgic image from the internet of a tea party where three women sat naked, sipping tea at a table with fine linens and patterned tea cups while wearing pearls and hats. Needless to say the class loved this particular postcard and thought it was likely to attract the attention of both travelers and locals. There is also an interesting connection to the literature with this particular postcard and class discussion in which Jaworski and Lawson, (2005: 125) suggest that overall we

are beginning to see as resurgence of "nostalgia as a dominant theme" in the tourist experience, where stories of the past are important to how we engage with the landscape.

One of the most challenging aspects of the "postcards from home" assignment for the faculty in the Pedagogy of Place group was figuring out how to assign grades to the postcards. For many, including myself, this creative aspect of the assignment was outside of my comfort zone. It was more subjective and outside the realm of objective outcomes associated with traditional research papers. While each of us approached the grading of the postcards differently, I used a marking rubric that was adapted from a rubric used by a place group colleague in biology. For my first attempt at this assignment, the rubric worked well as it gave me a framework to use for subjective evaluation. (See Figure 2). This is one of the advantages and enjoyable experiences (and there are many) of working as an interdisciplinary team with a common assignment. Each of us brings a different perspective to the table, but in many ways we struggle with similar challenges.

Student Names:		
Post Card	Marks Possible	Marks Given
Actual postcard format (includes, reference to tour, place for stamp, address, message)	4	
Does the imagery clearly relate to your tour of "place"	5	
Does the written content clearly relate to your tour of "place"	5	
Does the visual and written content compliment /support each other	5	
Overall is your postcard interesting- did you go the extra mile?	3	
	17	

Figure 2: Grading Rubric for TMGT 3010 Postcard assignment

Some observations and future directions:

The Community and Cultural Issues in Tourism course is offered every fall semester and I will continue to use the interpretive tour and postcard assignment as media for engaging tourists and

locals with the landscapes we travel through and occupy. Based on preliminary results from student reflections, questionnaires and interviews, students responded favorably to both the interpretive tour and postcard components of the assignment. Overall results indicated that they liked the “creative process” and “incorporating visual images whether it be artwork, photoshop, or photographs”. As one student stated “I will remember the postcard assignment. I won’t remember what’s on the exam” (student interview: 2013).

In response to student interest in creative expression of place, the tour requirements could be expanded to allow students to experiment with multiple formats of interpretation. For example, a geo-caching style tour or smart phone applications are possible formats for inscribing narratives on the landscape; enhancing place based learning and deepening student engagement with course material and the local community. As one student reflected:

“I think the presentations were are great idea because it allowed all of the other students to see what each group was working on throughout the semester rather than just handing in a paper that no one would see. I loved all of the creative forms that each group included from the brochures to the videos” (student reflection, 2013).

Results from student reflections also indicated they enjoyed getting out of the classroom and interacting with the community to develop their own interpretation of place.

“By actually participating in an assignment that taught me about place and theme, I was better able to solidify the concepts in my head. Watching other groups present their tours also allowed me to view place differently through each theme. Whether they connected through the physical landscape, the history or through art, I think it really helped the class realize how people can connect to place differently whether they are locals or visitors to the area” (student reflection, 2103).

Overall, this place based assignment provided opportunities for students to deepen their engagement with course material while making connections with the historical and cultural landscape of Kamloops. Through community and industry partnerships, research, creativity and interpretation students were able to connect with the local landscape through stories that held meaning for them. I will continue to make adaptations to the assignment in response to feedback from students and community partners.

Author’s Biography:

Robin is an Assistant Professor in the Tourism Management Department at Thompson Rivers University. Robin's teaching experience in sustainability and cultural issues in tourism have guided her research interests in sustainability, community engagement, cultural narrative and sense of place in urban, rural and wilderness spaces. Robin is also the recipient of the 2013/14 Teaching Excellence Award at TRU.

References:

- Bryman, A. (2004). *The Disneyization of society*. London: Sage.
- Carter, J. (Ed) 2001. Second edition with revisions published in electronic format on the website of the Scottish Interpretation Network (www.scotinterpnet.org.uk) 2001

Clifford, J. (1997). *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hinch, T. & J. Higham (2004) *Sport Tourism Development*. Clevedon: Channel View Publications.

Jaworski, A., & A Pritchard (Eds), (2005) *Discourse, Communication and Tourism*. Clevedon., Channel View Publications.

Lippard, L. (1999) *On the Beaten Track*. New York: New Press p. 13

Relph, E. (1976) *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion.

Salazar, N. (2010). *Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing imaginaries in tourism and beyond*. New York: Berghahn.