

The Assignment

The assignment is a place-based one-hour walking tour in a 3rd year Community and Cultural Issues in Tourism course, with the intended outcome to deepen student engagement with course content and the local community. The process I used in developing this group walking tour assignment is detailed in my 2014 paper published in CELT entitled “Place-Based Tourism Curriculum: Making Connections to Community” (Reid, 2014). For the past five years, this same place-based walking tour assignment has been the focus of a research project with a colleague, Dr. Kyra Garson, to explore how preparing students for working with diversity can contribute to a deeper understanding of world views and ultimately build intercultural skills. Dr. Garson and I designed a pedagogical intervention to explore specific changes related to how student groups are formed, prepared for interaction across cultures, and evaluated on the process of working with culturally diverse peers (Reid & Garson, 2016).

Our study is framed by Deardorff’s model of Intercultural Competence (2006, 2009) to investigate whether the place-based group walking tour assignment resulted in enhanced intercultural understanding among students. Specifically, our study focused on the three components of Deardorff’s (2009) intercultural model with the intention of investigating the level of acquired attitudes, including openness, respect curiosity and discovery (p. 4), knowledge/comprehension which includes “culture specific knowledge, especially a deeper understanding of worldviews, historical contexts and other influences on a culture” (p. 6), and skills which include the ability to listen and observe with a particular emphasis on being able to engage in active reflection (p.6). This research project, which received TRU Research Ethics Board approval (File #100477) in 2013 and is currently active, relies on student self-reflections to determine whether a place-based walking tour assignment facilitates a shift in attitudes, knowledge or skills resulting in enhanced intercultural understanding.

Methodology

At the end of the term, students are required to submit individual, self-reflections on their processes of creating the walking tours in Kamloops and working in diverse student groups. Students are required to provide full explanations to support their responses to 14 questions, five of which were place based and nine which were focused specifically on the process of working in groups (Reid & Garson, 2016). Student responses were thematically coded and analyzed using Nvivo qualitative analysis software to investigate their intercultural learning through place-based curriculum and the walking tour assignment, with the objective to determine whether place-based pedagogies can cultivate a shift in attitudes, knowledge, and skills and ultimately enhance intercultural learning. The focus of this study emphasized the following three place-based questions:

1. Before this assignment, had you thought much about place?
2. By completing this assignment, do you think differently about place, either as a specific place itself or what place means to you?
3. Did this place-based assignment influence how you connected with the rest of the course material?

These questions continue to form the basis to guide students’ feedback and course-related assignments regarding place-based classwork in a range of my 1st, 2nd and 3rd-year tourism courses.

Outcome

Tracking and follow-up from 86 student reflections collected over four semesters (Fall 2013, Winter 2013, Winter 2014, and Winter 2017) indicates that an intercultural shift occurred for 60 of the 86 students, with a shift in knowledge (culture-specific or regarding self-awareness) as a primary outcome. Conclusions could not be drawn from the remaining 26 student responses, as they were either too vague,

did not indicate whether they had experienced any kind of intercultural shift or answered the questions about place as a destination rather than as an intercultural experience. This outcome suggests that intercultural engagement and learning increases when students are given the opportunity to engage with the local community where they have come to study and to relate this experience to the context of their own home.

This echoes Lippard's observation 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" (1999, p.13). One option given to students in the walking tour assignment is that of creating a tour for locals as tourists in their own community. Reflections from local students regarding their knowledge of and engagement with the Kamloops landscape suggests an increased understanding of how people connect to place.

As locals we barely even engage in our own cities. I assumed that I would know more than any visitors about my place of residence, however, I now understand that visitors who have taken tours here are probably more educated about Kamloops heritage and art than I am! I think that as locals or tourist we all have to stop and look around more often rather than leading our busy, isolated lives" (Fall 2013, Domestic Female).

A number of student reflections included assumptions of Kamloops that produce and maintain an understanding of place from a distance. Hence, their experience of Kamloops was similar to looking at the landscape through a picture frame—the view is limited in scope and the response is often visual rather than experiential. Often, students (both domestic and international) arrive in Kamloops with preconceived notions of place, a characteristic evident in tourism in general, when tourists bring

with them predetermined perceptions of place before their trips begin.

Three years ago, when I came to Kamloops to study, I did not really like the city. I even told my parents that I lived in a boring desert. Now, I realized I was wrong (Fall 2013, International Male).

Both domestic and international students indicated that prior to the walking tour assignment they had not spent much, if any, time exploring the Kamloops landscape outside of the amenities and box stores in the vicinity of the university. Both the familiar and unfamiliar spaces were referenced by students reflecting on their initial perceptions versus their lived experiences of Kamloops.

Learning about the history of the city and what Kamloops used to look like gave a lot more meaning and thought to just walking down the street.... Now when I walk down the street, I think about how much this city meant to the locals and how important it was as an industrial center back in the 1900s. It is not just a small university town, but one filled with rich history and people (Fall 2013, Domestic Female).

A personal conversation with an international student in her 4th year of study revealed her disappointment in not knowing more about Kamloops during her first three year of study—she only learned about Kamloops through the walking tour assignment as she was departing. After this conversation, I began to wonder how many students leave campus at the end of their programs with a limited experience or understanding of the cultural and historical significance of the place they called home for the duration of their studies. How many opportunities to bring discipline-specific content into the community, and, conversely, to incorporate community into the classroom, are missed? Drawing again on the work of Lippard, she notes that “the special experience of a landscape can be impressive

because it evokes a known place or, on the other hand, because it is so totally unfamiliar” (1999 p.9).

Perhaps one of the more rewarding experiences of watching students find connections to an unfamiliar place was when one group, comprised of two domestic students and two international students—one from China and the other from Japan—created a tour of community gardens and the farmer’s market in the downtown area. During the presentation of their walking tour to the class, the student from Japan shared his first experience of the farmer’s market with enthusiasm and described his purchase of local produce to create a traditional Canadian Thanksgiving dinner for his Asian friends. When the class asked him how it went, he explained how he overcooked the turkey but resolved the issue by cutting it up and turning it into an Asian stir-fry. According to the student it was a successful Asian-Canadian Thanksgiving celebration.

In 2017, my research assistant, a 3rd-year student in the Bachelor of Tourism Management degree program was a participant observer in the community and cultural class. In her final paper she made the following observation:

As aspiring tourism professionals, developing intercultural skills is inarguably crucial. Students enrolled in the Bachelor of Tourism Management strive to work successfully in an extremely diversified industry. The majority of tourism careers that students would be pursuing post-graduation will inarguably require a well-developed understanding of other cultures and ways of life. It is an invaluable benefit for students to have this type of hands-on experience interacting with different cultures prior to graduation. The unfortunate reality is that there are countless students graduating across numerous faculties that graduate from their programs with no more than a sense of the world in which they have grown up in and are accustomed to. When place-based

education is introduced to students, it gives them the platform to get out into the community and interact with locals and learn in a way that is more reflective and realistic to a workplace setting. As a student myself, I can’t begin to describe how valuable it is to have opportunities to apply what’s learned in the classroom in real life settings (Fauve Garson Stewart, Directed Studies reflection, 2018).

Her observation of theoretical concepts learned in the classroom and the opportunity to apply these concepts through practical application is also noted in several student reflections.

The case helped me a lot to apply concepts that we learned in the class to a real-life experience, so instead of sitting home and working on my laptop, I actually went out and visited the site and that helped a lot to translate the concepts in the course material to real life experience (Winter 2018, International Male).

I think differently about Kamloops. I had never really connected myself to Kamloops even though I live here. I had always wanted to learn about different places not the place I am. I have learned a lot about Kamloops through this course. (Fall 2014, Domestic Female).

This dynamic between local students’ perceptions of their home place and international students’ perception of the place they had come to study was noted in the student reflections.

After doing this I do think differently about what place means now. Before it was just to go see something but now it so much more like what are the people who live here like, also about the culture of that place and not just about the buildings. It also made me think about what the place has to offer that can give you a positive experience of

that place, like learning about Peterson Creek rather than just think about going on a long a tiring hike. (Winter 2017, International Male)

Other major themes noted in the research findings involved the students' observations of how place meaning is shaped through personal experiences.

As a new immigrant in this country, I have been eager to experience the authentic culture to gain and feel a sense of belonging. I used to think even if I was living in the country and had the access to the authentic culture, I still felt nothing within my body. However, after completing this place-based assignment... I think as long as I actively participate in an activity (group meeting or the actual tour), the process of the activity will be authentic, and culture will be learned from the activity (Fall 2013, International Male).

This student's personal reflection demonstrates a compare and contrast strategy (King et al., 2013) where an intercultural experience helped them make sense of their new knowledge within the context of previously held perceptions or experiences. Another common theme arising from intercultural and place-based pedagogies is the importance of understanding histories and the political and cultural context of place from which world views of individuals and societies emerge.

After the completion of this assignment, I realized that place means so much to everyone and not just me. People like to bring a part of their home wherever they go. From the businesses we talked to and the other ones that our classmates presented on, it goes to shows how strong a sense of place is when interpreted correctly. It reminded me of a quote from one of Chimamanda Adichie's books that said, "our histories cling to us, we are

shaped by where we come from" (Winter 2014, International Female).

Place-based assignments that include intercultural perspectives of place to strengthen student capacity for understanding, empathy, and mutual respect across cultures are particularly relevant with respect to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) calls for Canadian educational institutes to include Indigenous perspectives and lived experience of place. In 2017 and 2018, curriculum in the Community and Cultural Issues in Tourism course at TRU was redesigned to include Indigenous and colonial narratives of the Canadian landscape. As a non-Indigenous instructor, Indigenous stories are not mine to tell. Those were related by guest lecturers who shared personal experiences of Indigenous histories. Of the 60 participants who indicated an intercultural shift, seven of the 18 students in the Winter 2017 class spoke in depth about Indigenous histories, whereas only three students from previous years did so. This course revision appears to have resulted in an increased understanding of history as being complex, in that stories of the landscape are both shared and contested by the players involved.

Yes, especially when looking at Aboriginal tourism. We don't know what stories there are to tell about the landscape, place or community. Just because one group has one story of the place, another may have a completely different one. We have to be aware of what we know about a place, and even more aware about what we don't know (Winter 2017, Domestic Female).

Through stories of place connections, students are able to develop a deeper understanding of other cultures and ultimately increase their capacity for empathy and mutual respect. As observed by King et al. (2013), empathy is one of the more complex approaches to understanding intercultural experiences. This level of complex learning was evident in the following domestic non-Indigenous student group reflection, as they struggled with

deciding what content to include in their walking tour.

In our walking tour, we touch on the tensions between the Indigenous people and the settlers in the Kamloops area. There is so much about western literature that perpetuates colonial views. Are we contributing to that in our walking tour? We did have a disclaimer in our tour about offensive terminology, but now I feel like that isn't enough. At the same time, I question whether giving a lengthy lecture about the treatment of Canada's Indigenous people would decrease the entertainment value of our tour. Then it becomes a discussion about commodifying culture and is it okay to convey a colonial perspective about Indigenous culture for entertainment and money? It's a tricky topic, and I don't think we were insensitive about it, but if it were to become a real tour, it would need to be approached with even more cultural sensitivity and probably should get input from the Kamloops Indian band. Especially considering our target market consists of mostly Europeans who likely have a very "cowboys and Indians" [sic] view of the Wild West [sic], and our tour doesn't do anything to deconstruct those stereotypes (2017 Winter, Domestic Female).

Student reflections also revealed that histories can be complicated, and that stories of place can be both shared and contested. During the four semesters during which data was collected, only a handful of students self-identified as Indigenous and participated in class conversations about Indigenous histories and colonial narrative. One Indigenous student explained how her perceptions of, and connection to her home place were shaped by her knowledge of the English language and, regrettably, not by the traditional language of her elders. Through this student's reflection on her personal identity and loss, other students were able to explore their own

personal identity as it relates to intercultural understanding and empathy.

This call for empathy is important. In working with curriculum that engages students from different cultural histories and lived experiences, I have realized the value of building rapport with our students in order to create a safe environment for intercultural interactions that promote understanding. When we ask students (both international and domestic) to share their life experiences there must be an element of trust between instructor and student. Assignments that are specifically designed to engage visiting students provide opportunities for me as an instructor to know who they are and some of the challenges they may be facing while being away from home. Recognizing this, I consciously work to create spaces where students feel comfortable expressing themselves, intellectually, creatively and emotionally. In a post card assignment for the Introduction to Tourism Course, for example, a student from China submitted a hand-drawn postcard of a sole individual with arms raised to the sky. The background was filled with colourful, explosive images of a celebration. In his reflection, he described how homesick he was for his family during the Chinese New Year and that he did not have any friends in Canada with whom to celebrate. In recognition of their trust in showing their emotions, in my written comments to my students I thank them for sharing their personal experiences and let them know that I am always available to support them in that regard.

Going Forward

Because student feedback on the course has been so favourable, I will continue to refine and develop new place-based assignments to give students opportunities to make connections to place, wherever they are, and to reflect upon their personal horizons of experiences and interpretations of the world in which they find themselves. Throughout Canada we have many settings, both urban and rural,

that provide opportunities for high-impact place-based learning across disciplines. Regardless of the disciplinary lens we use, there are as many cultural ways of seeing and perceiving landscapes as there are landscapes themselves (Lippard, 1999). My focus has been to build and adapt curriculum within the context of tourism in a way that encourages students to value multiple perspectives of place and to recognize that there are many different lived experiences to experience in a global environment. Going forward, I will continue to consult the literature for current research on intercultural effectiveness and the integration of learning in my course content in order to provide further frameworks that can be used to explore and benefit from intercultural learning in the context of place-based pedagogies.

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Biography

Robin Reid is an Associate Professor in the Tourism Management Department at Thompson Rivers University (TRU). Her research interests include sustainable communities, cultural narrative and sense of place in urban, rural and wilderness landscapes.