

People, Place, and Land: Finding a Sense of Belonging Through Shared Learning

WestCAST 2020 - Paper Presentation

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Abstract

The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) School of Education is in the midst of redesigning the Bachelor of Education Teacher Education Program in response to BC's Curriculum (2019), the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (2015), and the teaching and learning needs of teacher candidates who are situated in Northern British Columbia. The signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) of the redesigned UNBC Teacher Education is "People, Place, and Land." The focus of the redesigned program is rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. At the heart of the redesigned program is to develop and nurture the teacher candidate's voice, efficacy, and identity. The redesigned program must undergo multiple stages of approval through the British Columbia Teachers' Council (BCTC) and governing bodies of UNBC. In the meantime, the faculty of the Teacher Education Program from 2018 to 2020 took the opportunity to tinker with different learning opportunities and experiences that would be embedded in the redesigned Teacher Education Program that embraces *people, place, and land* to be "the teacher." Teacher candidates of the UNBC Teacher Education developed a sense of belonging over time through shared learning experiences situated in place, community, and local Indigenous knowledge. The hopes of the redesigned UNBC Teacher Education Program is to honour and respect Indigenous worldviews and perspectives, value teaching in rural and remote communities, and develop one's identity to become a learner and educator.

Dr. Thomas King, a Cherokee, German and Greek scholar, writer and professor from the University of Guelph famously states, "the truth about stories is that that's all we are." Over the past few years, the faculty and Teacher Candidates of the School of Education Teacher Education Program at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) are changing their story by exploring place responsive learning and deepening their understandings of Indigenous worldviews and perspectives. Diversifying learning experiences by taking Teacher Candidates outside, partnering with people from local communities and institutions, and inviting Indigenous knowledge keepers to share and embed Indigenous knowledge into the program helped faculty in the Teacher Education program to design a learning opportunities that are holistic, reflective, reflexive, relational, and experiential (First Peoples Principles of Learning, 2008).

Stories are becoming intertwined with new practices and ways of being in the UNBC Teacher Education Program. Teacher Candidates are immersed in learning experiences that are meaningful, situated in place, and relevant to the teaching and learning needs of schools in British Columbia (BC) and BC's Curriculum (2019). For example, Teacher Candidates started the 2019 school year with a two-day B.Ed. Orientation session that was located at the UNBC Wood Innovation and Design Centre in downtown Prince George, BC, at the Lheidli T'enneh Memorial Park that is adjacent to the Fraser River, and at the Two Rivers Gallery to observe the "Redress: Sacred Obligation" exhibition curated by Rose Spahan who invited various Indigenous Artists to share their views on reconciliation (2019). Faculty collaborated with teachers from the local school district, educators from local community organizations, and Indigenous educators from the university to facilitate an orientation session that incorporated *People, Place, and Land*, the signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) of the redesigned Teacher Education at UNBC. Emergent understandings of education are developing based on local Indigenous ways and stories of place.

Lortie (1975) coined the term *The Apprenticeship of Observation*, which "describes the phenomenon whereby student teachers arrive for their training courses having spent thousands of hours as school children observing and evaluating professionals in action" (Borg, 2004). In essence, student teachers have predisposition and expectations of what teaching and learning is based on their experiences as a student observing teachers in their classes. However, BC's (New) Curriculum is asking something different from teachers, thus teacher candidates, because "British Columbia's curriculum is being modernized to respond to this demanding world" that is "technology-rich... communication is instant and information is immediately accessible" (BC Curriculum, 2019). Over twenty years ago in 1983, Walter Doyle presented that what students learn is a direct function of the tasks they are asked to do. If classroom learning is to change and improve, then pedagogy and expectations must change at the university level. The UNBC Teacher Education Program underwent a redesign process to be responsive to BC's Curriculum (2019) but also rural and remote communities, and the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (2015). At UNBC, Teacher Candidates needed a new model and different experiences to enhance their learning.

"The curriculum must be student-centred and flexible, and maintain a focus on literacy and numeracy, while supporting deeper learning" (BC Curriculum, 2019). BC's Curriculum also includes developing the *Educated Citizen*, enables personalized learning experiences, and incorporates Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge. In order for the UNBC Teacher Education Program to be responsive to BC's Curriculum and its expectations for transformation, faculty members challenged and questioned the structure and policies of university programs to rethink and redesign a curriculum that is based on interacting with

place and examining how place influences learning. *Story* is being created from experiences, learning, reflecting, and practice. The UNBC Teacher Education faculty redesigned curriculum. They participated in co-teaching opportunities, blended courses together to reflect BC's Curriculum, and relied on each other's strengths and interests. The *place of learning* becomes increasingly important. Interconnectedness, focusing on connectivity of everything in the universe, and ways of caring for each other and our environment reflects the First Peoples Principles of Learning (2008) and heavily influenced the planning and implementation of teaching and learning experiences in the UNBC Teacher Education Program.

Faculty and students in the Teacher Education Program are becoming more aware and cognizant of the positive experiences when traditional values and beliefs are embedded and accessed, that is deliberately modeled by community members and selves. The UNBC Teacher Education Program in 2018 initiated three interrelated learning activities as part of the practicum experience: e-Portfolios, single point rubrics, and peer-oriented triads. There is an elementary teacher cohort and a secondary teacher cohort at UNBC. Teacher candidates in each cohort are assigned into peer-oriented triads. The intention of triads was to provide ongoing support, peer-feedback, and co-planning opportunities for Teacher Candidates during practicum. The Teacher Candidates created their own support systems within their triads, thus creating a variety of informal, intertwined relationships. Teacher Candidates were able to recognize each other's strengths and challenges as they worked together to build a strong unit. Cohorts became interdependent with little competitiveness and mutually created a closely woven sense of communal responsibility.

Developing a strong sense of responsibility for the environment and each other's well-being shaped the experience of UNBC Teacher Candidates and Teacher Education faculty. Supporting each other, moving beyond our 'learned' selves, and stretching beyond what we have understood being in a classroom entails shifted "our classroom" to different locations around the university campus in and local communities. UNBC Teacher Education classes are held outside on the land and in place with learning led by local experts and knowledge keepers. For example, Teacher Candidates and the instructor walk to and learn at the pit house located in *The Forests for the World* at UNBC, they travel to the Nechako Lakes School District to engage in Steam Keepers and the *KOH-learning* project with K-12 students, or participate in learning embedded in schools where Teacher Candidates learn about teaching and learning within an elementary school in the Prince George School District and work in K-12 classrooms and small groups of K-12 students *in situ* to make immediate connections between theory and practice. Formative learning experiences are informed by the unique characteristics of these places where the learning is happening.

Learning is not limited to the confines of classrooms at the university, but they are found in places like the art gallery, coffee shops, outdoor spaces like trail systems and parks, and classrooms in public schools. Learning includes the importance of place rather than just focussing on specific content. Human stories, rather than content stories, are unfolding as Teacher Candidates enter into local communities to engage in different learning experiences, whether it would be gathering bark from local trees, hunting for moose, or interviewing local community members to gain authentic historical perspective. The relationship between self and self as educator strengthens as different kinds of knowledge are valued in the Teacher Education Program. This model of teaching and learning is embedding a strong purpose for learning and Teacher Education faculty are creating learning opportunities for Teacher Candidates that encourages personalized learning and models ways of learning that moves away from telling Teacher Candidates “what” to learn and from whom. Evidence of learning is not a test or final paper, but experiences, shared understandings, and interconnections between people, place, and land. The vibrancy of learning in this teacher education program is rooted deeply in Indigenous beliefs and expressed in the First Peoples Principles of Learning.

Teacher Candidates are not only accepting responsibility for their own learning, but also in co-designing learning experiences in their classes through inquiry, curiosity and unique expressions of understandings. For example, Teacher Candidates invited Elders into their classroom to drum, sing and tell stories and collaborated with and supported classmates of Indigenous heritage to introduce cultural understandings and perspectives through drumming, dance, and artistic expressions. Monique Gray Smith (2017) defines *reciprocity* as the “mutual exchange of privilege.” Teacher Candidates are learning the appreciation of each other’s gifts and this shared learning results in a stronger sense of self and overall well-being in their cohorts. These learning experiences invited Teacher Candidates to explore different ways of knowing. Local community practices, such as smudging, being open and quiet in outdoor spaces, learning traditional uses of plants, and creating cyclic learning rather than linear, are taking root. The roles and responsibilities within communities to support each member of the community is increasingly apparent.

Place-based learning is dependent on not only an appreciation of place, but the commitment of care to that place. Teacher Candidates and Teacher Education faculty are exploring ways that this commitment of care for place can be enacted. The history of place is uncovered through storytelling. Learning about our place, Prince George and the northern interior of BC, is happening through rich stories. For example, Teacher Candidates are learning from a local historian as well as from texts and visual resources about the local area where they in turn can share these stories about community in their in-situ experiences with elementary age students alongside with the historian in the classrooms for rich stories of lives lived to unfold. The cycle of shared learning develops a relationship with place and deepens the relationship with

one another as K-12 students and Teacher Candidates both explore what it means to live in this place. The land has stories to be share. Exploring place develops an understanding that we do not need to change the land, but what we need to do is let the land be the teacher and allow our sense of place shape us.

Teacher Candidates in the UNBC Teacher Education Program share real-life experiences without the fear of judgement. “Learning involves exploring one’s identity” (First Peoples Principles of Learning, 2008). Learning from people, place and land, Teacher Candidates are learning about themselves as learners and as teachers. Parker Palmer (2009) says, “you teach who you are.” Teaching is about identity and integrity. The UNBC Teacher Education Program attempts to capture the changes in BC’s Curriculum with personalized learning and flexible learning experiences, embody the First Peoples Principles of Learning and Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge, and be informed by local places, the land, and community. From this learning, Teacher Candidates and Teacher Education faculty envision a program that deepens one’s sense of responsibility towards learning, community, self, and the environment. To nurture is increasing in significance and growing in focus. The UNBC Teacher Education is in the midst of redesigning and will soon be implementing a new curriculum and program that will nourish new dispositions, aptitudes, and attitudes towards teaching and learning in BC schools. BC’s Curriculum allows for slowing down and deepening learning, thus allows for Teacher Candidates and UNBC Teacher Education faculty contribute to each other’s understandings in new ways of teaching and learning.

The new direction the UNBC Teacher Education Program is taking and will be taking in the redesigned program focuses on people, place, and land and the roles and responsibilities that are needed and expected to develop a new understanding of teaching and learning with respect to BC’s Curriculum and First Peoples Principles of Learning. Teacher Candidates and Teacher Education faculty form a community within a community where each are developing and discovering their identities as educators and building a connection and relationships with the local community, the land, and different places beyond the classroom to teach and learn. Teacher Candidates and Teacher Education faculty are engaging in “new” teaching and learning opportunities and experiences to create and deepen a “new” understanding of teaching and learning that is informed and inspired by rural and remote communities, community members, and the land that is the northern interior of BC to serve as teacher and storyteller. Rich, complex learning is evolving through a purposeful, critical assessment of ways of knowing and ways of being. Perhaps the greatest result is the community of learning that emerges from this way of being.

Richard Wagamese (2019) wrote, “it begins, as all things do, with stories.” People, place, and land are telling us a story and at UNBC, learning weaves our stories together into these shared experiences.

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- The WestCAST 2020 presentation involves two non-Indigenous faculty members from the UNBC School of Education and one non-Indigenous Teacher Candidate to share our collective pedagogies and learning experiences in the transformation of the UNBC Teacher Education Program. The two faculty members will start and end the 20-minute presentation with the Teacher Candidate at the heart of the presentation. The content provided by the Teacher Candidate during the presentation is not included in this paper.*