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Working toward a place-based online pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Online learner engagement research has risen internationally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in relation to experiential learning. However, this research has focused on the use of technology to access learning about a particular place rather than consider the pedagogical potential of the places in which the learner is located. This study therefore considers the question: What is the pedagogical potential of place for online learners? The aim of the study is to scrutinise pedagogical practices that facilitate applied understanding of course concepts in a way that enables learners to contextualise learning in their unique locations. This paper analyzes recounts of experiences with place-based inquiry with online students in an initial teacher education course offered in regional Australia. The evidence presented suggests that place-based pedagogy enables students to see learning concepts at work *in context*, beyond the abstract. Further, contrary to expectations that the experience of place-based learning is diminished in an online environment, there might be advantages for the preparation of pre-service teachers in experiencing place-based inquiry in their own locales.

Introduction

Online learning was catapulted into wider relevance during 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic when education providers across all levels of education adopted online learning during campus closures (Shin & Hickey, 2020). Prior to this, online learning was already growing in importance as universities and students realised its possibilities for increased flexibility of access (Olson & Werhan, 2012), and its potential for ongoing educational transformation of a variety of educational contexts is now being much more broadly adopted following recognition of its provision of wider educational access and innovation (Heng & Sol, 2021). For this purpose, online learning is defined as education that is facilitated by an educational institution using synchronous and/or asynchronous internet technologies that students can undertake from any location without the need for face-to-face or in situ instruction. In tandem with increased access, limitations of online learning have been repeatedly raised based upon the inherent limitations for practical and experiential learning with students

"becoming observers rather than participants in an active learning process" (Thomas & Bryson, 2021, p. 446). Similarly, the rapid transition to online learning both in university and in school contexts during the pandemic as a stop-gap measure meant that many educators have been thrust into this new way of working without a suitable pedagogical understanding to underpin their educational practice (Kadhila & Nyambe, 2021), meaning that online pedagogy is often undeveloped. In this article, we seek to consider how to combat the disembodied or passive view of online learning and investigate a pedagogical approach that could be used to create immersive place-based learning experiences for online students, emerging from our work with pre-service teachers who are preparing to teach geography and the wider Humanities curriculum in the classroom.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Australia has followed the general trend towards expanding online study, with a noted increase in pre-service teachers (PSTs) choosing online or blended study modes (on-campus study with online study components). This rose from 22% to 41% between 2005 and 2015, and by 2015, 40% of Australian ITE providers offered some or all of their courses in online or blended modes (J. E. Dyment & Downing, 2020). Most recent figures through the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) indicate that 25% of ITE students commence their studies enrolled as online students (2020). Similarly, multi-modal or blended commencements that combine online and face-to-face study have seen a consistent rise in enrolments, rising from 10% in 2010 to 15% in 2017 (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, 2016). Given this growth, alongside concerns for the facilitation of experiential learning afforded by online study, it is unsurprising that reservations are sometimes held regarding the integration of theory, practice, and workplace readiness in online modes of ITE (Allen et al., 2014). Additional concerns have been raised regarding the effectiveness of online learning in heavily praxis-based content areas (J. E. Dyment & Downing, 2020), which includes studies in Geography, where learning through experience is considered much more valuable than learning by observing (France & Haigh, 2018; Thomas & Bryson, 2021). As Humanities educators in an Initial Teacher Education program, which included Geography as a core focus, this was certainly an experienced concern and led to a desire to explore opportunities for experiential learning for online learners.

The "power of place" has repeatedly been put forward to engage learners in experiential, immersive and visceral learning. The notion of "place" goes beyond physical location and can include political, economic, and cultural activity (Vander Ark et al., 2020). This paper highlights the fact that all learning occurs in places – in home-offices, houses, and communities, and consequently, all online learning can be place-based despite learners being geographically and physically separate. Place-based learning is understood as an educational approach that intentionally engages learners with their local environment and community to create authentic learning that is unique to each student and meaningful to their personal context.

Recognising the value of place-based learning and the imperative to engage PSTs in integrating theory and practice, we as educators sought to incorporate a much stronger place-based dimension to our students' coursework and assessment in our shared History and Geography course. Given the large proportion of online learners, we were particularly intent on facilitating learning that was appropriate for

online learners to engage in, and benefit from, meaningful place-based learning, believing that "online does not mean devoid of place". As such, we set out to understand: *What is the pedagogical potential of place, particularly for online learners?*

This paper thus reports on our engagement with this problem, the ways that we developed learning tasks and assessment to address this and our reflections on the application of place-based pedagogy, particularly for online learners. The findings have relevance for teacher educators charged with preparing PSTs to teach Geography and other subjects for which place-based inquiry might be an appropriate pedagogy.

Literature review

Virtual, distance, and online learning became the hallmark of the COVID-19 narrative, and the need for alternative education options to help facilitate learning in geographic studies, such as place-based learning, gained greater attention in the education community (Connolly, 2020). Teacher's blogs, such as the National Geographic (2022) Education Blog, suggest that educators have stumbled upon place-based learning as a means of making online learning work.

Within this paper, place is understood to be a location imbued with meaning(s) via human interaction (ACARA, 2013a; Malpas, 2011; Tuan, 1977; van Eijck & Roth, 2010). Opinions differ as to whether meaning(s) are inherent to places and are drawn out as a result of human engagement, or whether people foist their anthropocentric interpretations onto places (Cameron, 2008; Ingold, 1993) and, for the purpose of this paper, both possibilities remain open. What is accepted by the authors is that "places are profoundly pedagogical" (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 621); not necessarily inherently so (Gough, 2008), but they have significant capacity as contexts for teaching and learning (Gruenewald, 2008). Further, Somerville (2007) suggests that place is both physical and imaginary, and a possible lens to "construct knowledge of the world" (p. 149).

In addition to the multi-faceted conceptualisation of place described above, Nissley (2011, p. 549) reported "four ways in which we approach the centrality of place as it relates to learning: (1) learning *about* a place, (2) learning *in* a place, (3) learning *from* a place, and (4) learning *for* a place" (emphasis in original). When place-based education is planned by educators and/or students, the purpose of teaching and learning experiences will, in large part, determine whether students are to learn about, in, from or for a place or a combination of these. In addition, the four ways can require various degrees of engagement with "place". It may not be deemed necessary, for example, for students to leave the classroom to learn "about" or "for" another place. If they are to learn "from" or "in" that place, then an excursion is required. On the other hand, students might learn "about" somewhere by being "in" that place. The point here is not to delineate between approaches to place-based learning so much as to highlight the different degrees to which "place" might (or might not) be incorporated into learning and teaching.

Place-based learning has been promoted as a way of connecting schools and communities with ongoing benefits for local social and ecological relationships (McInerney et al., 2011). McInerney et al. (2011) argued that, when a critical perspective is applied, young people can be encouraged to connect local issues with global concerns and ask questions about what and how things might be

different. This is especially significant when considering ideas raised by 2008) around colonisation and reinhabitation (Somerville, 2007). Further, McInerney et al. (2011) concluded by discussing the need to appropriately prepare teachers, who may not have experienced critical or place-based approaches.

Place-based education in initial teacher education

Experiential learning is a key consideration of place-based learning. Drawing on educational theories from Dewey and others, Glazier and Bean (2019) found that experiential learning has substantial potential to change how PSTs think and act. Hence, if PSTs are to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for implementing place-based learning in Geography and the broader Humanities curriculum, then incorporating place-based learning experiences in ITE seems a logical approach.

Thacher (2019) examined 38 peer-reviewed studies of place-based approaches in ITE and identified three major themes. Most significant was the integration of theory and practice as PSTs experienced place-based approaches and engaged in reflective practice to integrate their experiences. A second theme related to the value of a coherent approach across a teacher education program rather than isolation in a single course that could leave place-based learning approaches seeming like an optional extra rather than a core element of teacher education. The third theme recognised the challenges for preparing PSTs to implement place-based learning approaches in what might be very different contexts after graduation. The challenges include limited local knowledge to support planning for place-based learning in unfamiliar contexts and barriers stemming from school or system expectations about pedagogies. Therefore, programs need to prepare PSTs for addressing these challenges, and the research reported in this paper sought to address this issue for our own students.

The Australian Curriculum (2015); (ACARA, 2012, 2013a) promotes inquiry pedagogies but students in ITE programs will have variable experiences of inquiry pedagogies from the perspective of a learner from their former school experience. Hence, it is important that ITE programs include opportunities for such experiences; and inquiry approaches to place-based learning reported by other researchers offer ideas that may be adopted or adapted. Langran and DeWitt (2020a) described a model for critical place-based inquiry learning built on four components: read the world, understand place, leverage technology, and tell stories from multiple perspectives. Norman and Wall (2020) described how they engaged PSTs in an inquiry process of developing integrated curriculum units including a place-based element. The experience enabled creation of stronger links between theory and practice through working in a group where there were ample opportunities to collaborate and discuss different approaches to the design of learning activities. Wooltorton et al. (2020) engaged in an exploration of a pedagogy in which learners might experience a place using Indigenous perspectives. They described a pedagogy of "becoming family with place" and presented a record of their experiences in the Noongar country of south-western Australia. The inquiry approach they adopted resulted in an enriched understanding of the place, and they offered it as a model for incorporation into other ITE programs.

Place-based, online education

A key driver of the uptake of online education is the flexibility it offers for study without relocating to a university city. Provided that there is reliable connection to the internet, all places should be equivalent for accessing online education but, without co-location of PSTs and teacher educators, designing and implementing place-based learning activities can be more challenging. Hence, combining place and online learning might seem counter-intuitive, or even counter-productive to some, particularly given that online technologies are supposedly contributing to the undermining of place as a determinant of experience (Ingold, 1993). As such, a range of intentional strategies must be considered for online learners. Langran and DeWitt (2020b) described a variety of technological tools and associated projects that might be used directly to facilitate place-based learning or as models for adaptation in schools or ITE programs as appropriate. They range from pencil and paper sketching of maps through to recording observations by photography to the analysis of publicly available datasets and creation of presentations using visualisation tools. Importantly, however, the key factor is that online students must be supported to engage with various locations, depending on their own locale. It seems likely that at least some reasons for PSTs wishing to study online may be associated with their personal links to the places where they reside. Moreover, as teachers they will need to develop place-based learning activities appropriate to the locations of their classes. Hence, given that it is not possible for online-based ITEs to offer place-based learning bound to a common place, it makes sense to engage PSTs in exploring their own localities as a setting for place-based learning.

It was thus at the intersection of these various understandings that we developed our course with a desire to engage our learners in place-based inquiry, helping them to understand not only how we can learn *about* and *for* place, but also *from* and *in* place, harnessing a range of technologies to allow students who are not co-located, to experience place-based learning.

Materials and methods

This paper reports on the authors' experiences within a Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) course offered in the second year of an ITE program at a multi-campus regional university in Australia, within which Geography and History are core components. While the course is offered on campus in both semester offerings, the majority of students enrol online because they are domiciled in locations distant from campus or live nearby but are seeking flexibility to accommodate employment and family commitments. The on-campus offers have a weekly three-hour session incorporating a mix of lecture, tutorial, and workshop activities. The online offers have a weekly synchronous video tutorial, which is recorded for those who cannot attend at the nominated timeslot. All students additionally have access to written materials provided in the online Learning Management System and forums for asynchronous discussion.

In developing the course, the team were significantly focused on embedding the principles of inquiry that feature in the HASS curriculum, particularly geographical and historical inquiry, and ways that this could be embedded in the students' local contexts. In addition to research undertaken by the course team, the course

development was further informed by personal engagement of some team members with place-based and place-responsive learning experiences in wider personal study, including activities such as capturing and uploading photos of objects in the local environment that represented concepts they were studying (e.g. in one course, HTML tags). This activity from personal study was translated into our ITE course context by asking students to upload images illustrating historical concepts that form the core of the Australian Curriculum: History, such as *cause and effect*. In another example, a place-based assessment for an urban planning degree undertaken by the partner of one author inspired integration of active, place-based geographical inquiries. Collectively, the research into place-based pedagogies and personal experiences helped to shape a vision for the course that provided a range of place-based learning experiences for all students to participate in as a central feature of their learning and through which they could experience the HASS concepts in action.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this paper were reflective written narratives individually by the authors, based upon our role as the three course writers and facilitators. To reflect purposefully on what we had done as course designers and educators and draw meaningful insights from our approach and its merits for place-based learning online, we adapted approaches from narrative inquiry, with a recognition that "story represents a way of knowing and thinking that is particularly suited to explicating the issues" (Carter, as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 31). These reflective narratives enabled us as educators to purposefully draw upon and critique our pedagogical processes in line with the research and theoretical perspectives informing our course. Importantly, this process required researcher reflexivity to scrutinise our position and implicit assumptions both during the narrative writing and later during data analysis during which dialogic reflection occurred between the team members to engage in "critical self-scrutiny" (McDougall, 2004, p. 34). Equally, we recognised that "The capacities to be reflexive, to keep track of one's biases, and to monitor one's emotional responses are the same capacities that allow researchers to get close enough to human action to understand what is going on" (Hatch, 2002, p. 10) and as such, we valued our engagement with the research context as a means to draw meaningfully from our personal engagement as course writers, facilitators and researchers, seeking insights that might inform future teaching.

Three course artefacts were chosen as the focus for our written reflective narratives: learning activities designed to engage PSTs with the content of two course modules and an assignment intended to assess PSTs' learning relevant to the geography curriculum, especially the key concept of *place*. These artefacts were selected from a larger number of potential coursework exercises; chosen for the ways they assist in clearly and simply exemplifying the place-based approach to learning we had instituted for our learners. For each of the three course artefacts, we then prepared written reflective narratives to the same series of questions:

(1) Why was this activity in the course?
(2) What impact did it have?

(3) How significant was "place" in this activity?

(4) Would substitution of this activity with a "placeless" activity have much impact?

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the University of Southern Queensland ethics body (H22REA270).

When all responses had been prepared, the team members read the complete corpus to gain a sense of the whole and discuss responses and seek common themes. In keeping with processes of narrative inquiry, we then engaged in the process of drafting and co-composing polished texts (Clandinin, 2013) that summarised the key themes and salient insights in response to each of the three artefacts. The aim was to make explicit the features of the place-based course artefacts in ways that might enable relevant lessons to be learned and potentially applied in other contexts.

Results

The findings that follow are the final polished texts structured around the three course artefacts on which the team reflected, with original text from the researcher reflections indicated in italics. For each artefact, there is a description of the task presented to PSTs, followed by our collective co-composed commentary based on the discussions of responses among team members.

Artefact 1: Introduction to geographical inquiry

Artefact 1 was an activity located in the first module of the course. It was introduced following a conversation among team members about the importance of place in the Australian Curriculum: Geography (ACARA, 2013b). We were aware that PSTs were unlikely to have experienced the recommended place-based inquiry during their own education. Hence, we adopted an experiential approach (Albion & Tondeur, 2018; Glazier & Bean, 2019) in which PSTs would experience the pedagogies promoted in the course and learn by doing. The sequence of PSTs seeing, then doing, and ultimately teaching using a similar process was a key feature of the course design.

In a wholly face-to-face course for this activity, we would have taken all PSTs to a local site selected for its geography education potential. Because our course had both face-to-face and online cohorts, with PSTs in the online cohort widely distributed, it was impossible to take them to one place or be confident that they could all visit places with known similarities. Instead, we addressed the problem of "multi-placedness" by developing an activity in each student's locale.

The introduction to the online activity noted that PSTs had already considered the nature of geography as a field of study and needed now to consider how people "do geography" and how geography might be taught and learned in school. They were reminded of their prior explorations of inquiry pedagogy and advised that rather than reading about geographical inquiry they were invited to step away from the computer and experience inquiry for themselves. That introduction was followed by a prompt to action:

> Go for a walk around your neighbourhood or your workplace. Take a camera and a notebook or voice recorder. Look around you and start asking some questions about things you would like to know more about, such as landmarks, objects, people and places. . . . Take photos of the things that arouse your curiosity and make note of your questions and any other thoughts you have as you walk around. Start thinking about where you might to find answers to some of these questions and record those thoughts as well. When you get home, do a quick internet search and see what you can find out or head down to your local library or information centre and ask for help in finding answers.

The instructions continued with an invitation to PSTs to think about how they could develop a walking field trip for a geography class and to post to the relevant course forum, including photos, what they found, and their thoughts about field trips. They were further encouraged to reflect on aspects of the activity that facilitated their learning and reminded that doing geography goes beyond learning facts to seeking answers to questions in the process of geographical inquiry. This process *helped to make connections between abstract concepts they were learning in the course by finding objects that represented those concepts in their immediate environment; and modelled creative, place-based learning activities*, thus helping students *experience* the geographic concepts while *modelling the inquiry pedagogy that students will be using in their future classrooms.*

Direct observation of the PSTs who engaged in the activity on campus established that *students found things of curiosity that they had not seen before. Many of them were in their third year on campus but engaging in the inquiry opened their eyes to new things and engendered increased curiosity about the world around them.* The online students were similarly excited as they had *the chance to move away from their computer as part of the learning process, and engage with things in their own back yard.* Some online students had shared that the task had *motivated them to visit somewhere they had wanted to find out about* or, in some cases, to get out and about with their children on what became a family learning opportunity. In a few cases, online students reported using Google Earth to virtually "see" a chosen place, but even those cases were driven by inquiry. We observed how this task was important for a number of online students *who often feel disconnected from the learning because it refers to an area that they have no knowledge of.* Whether their activity was with the class group, alone or with family, or virtual, it involved purposeful exploration of a place which resulted in place-based learning through which the course theory moved from abstract to concrete experience.

As the team reflected, we came to understand that this activity *broke open stereotypes and understandings about studies in geography.* Our own school experiences of geography cast it as *a dry and boring study of foreign places through maps and statistics.* We reflected how our PSTs had initially reported similar experiences in class and through forum posts, so this place-based personal experience of geographical inquiry was important for *opening their eyes to the potential of place as a primary resource for learning*, making them aware of geographical features and initiating an increased tendency to observe local places with an inquiring eye. *The significance of arousing curiosity and using this as a vehicle of learning in the context of an inquiry project was immediately foregrounded, helping students to understand the power of inquiry for their own learning, and thus the learning of their future students. By inquiring into their own local context, students were not only learning about inquiry pedagogy by engaging in it, but were also understanding the educative potential of place, most notably, that immediate contexts have significant*

educational potential. For PSTs, beginning to see their *local sites as places of potential, of assessing whether they were suitable for engaging in several stages of inquiry, and enable-[ing] the exploration of geographical concepts, pedagogical strategies and curriculum requirements . . . not only developed* their *understanding of the inquiry process, inquiry pedagogy and Geography curriculum foci, but also critically* informed *their understanding of its application in real contexts.*

Compared to other less place-based forms of geographical inquiry using print or online sources, this simple activity appears to have induced a more powerful awakening of PSTs' understanding of place and its potential for learning. Geographical inquiry is so bound to place that other inquiry activities may have produced learning *about* inquiry rather than learning *through* inquiry (Nissley, 2011).

Artefact 2: Geographical concepts

Within the Australian Curriculum: Geography (ACARA, 2013b), the concepts of place, space, environment, interconnection, sustainability, scale, and change are identified as integral to the development of geographical understanding. Artefact 2 was a learning activity placed within the second module of the course to assist PSTs with developing their awareness of the key geographical concepts in their environments while reinforcing their experience of geographical inquiry.

Discussions among the course team during the design phase highlighted the importance of modelling the inquiry pedagogy PSTs would be expected to use in their future classrooms. Hence, we sought to teach *through* inquiry rather than *about* it (Nissley, 2011) and conceived this activity to model creative place-based learning activities and to enable PSTs to connect abstract concepts from the course with objects that represented those concepts in their immediate environment. It invited PSTs to act:

> Look around your home or wider local environment to find examples or representations of the five geographical concepts that are the focus of this module.

> Take a photo of each and upload it to the *Module two: Geography* forum. Using the language of the curriculum definitions, explain how each photo is an example of each concept.

On completion of the task, PSTs were encouraged to think about what they did and learned and to write a reflection on what worked and how that might benefit them as learners and teachers.

Some PSTs completed the activity in on-campus classes where they were sent out in pairs to take photographs. On returning, they remarked that the activity was *more challenging than they expected, requiring critical and creative thinking to obtain appropriate images.* Class discussion of the shared images was lively, and PSTs found that the activity *clarified understanding of the concepts by making them more concrete through locating them in a place.* Using the immediate context of the university grounds was an important element that enabled PSTs to see *pedagogical possibilities* in all geographic locations, reinforcing the important understanding that the meaningful study of geography can be conducted in personal locales. It was clear that they had begun to appreciate *the value of learning beyond the classroom not just for their future students but for themselves.*

Participation by PSTs studying online provided useful insights into how students who completed the learning task were understanding the geographic concepts, with the images and descriptions offering more depth than a *paraphrase of a definition*. Engaging with place enabled PSTs to *see a place differently – to understand that the concepts in the curriculum are not simply notions that exist only in abstract forms within texts, exercise books and classrooms, but can be seen and experienced in everyday life*.

Compared to other course activities within the experience of team members, this *was considered one of the most successful by the course team, albeit with limitations*. PSTs enjoyed the activity and *uploaded multiple photos of environments around their home including just outside their front doors*. What was striking was how PSTs' lives became *integral* to their study and they were willing to let peers into their lives through sharing personal images. It would have been possible to construct this activity as "placeless" by inviting PSTs to select images from one of the many easily accessed online collections of images. However, working in their own places to find examples of the concepts opened their eyes to the *pedagogical possibility* of place and enabled them to connect with the fact that *everything that they see and do can be used in their teaching*.

Nonetheless, one aspect we could not ignore about this activity for online learners was the apparently low participation rate (if forum posts sharing engagement indicated participation):

> Low participation online made it difficult for [us] to establish the degree to which the activity had an impact on student learning. However, the activity provided an insight into how students were understanding the concepts. Rather than relying on a students' ability to paraphrase a definition, [we] had an image and a written description of the objects in addition to the definition.

As such, we considered the activity to be of clear value both for student learning and for our insight into their developing understanding of geographic concepts. However, we recognised that the impetus for completion needed to be made more explicit for online learners to benefit more broadly, or potentially, further support provided to enable more students to complete – and benefit from – the task.

Artefact 3: Geographical inquiry assignment

Assessment items are significant course components because they contribute to determination of grades and provide implicit signals to students about what is considered important in a course. Additionally, assessment, when directly linked to content application tasks, can motivate students to "prioritise the practical learning components and reflections, enhancing the quality of their learning through the desire for assessment success" (Burke & Fanshawe, 2021, p. 106). In designing our course, we sought to align assessment with course content by highlighting the significance of inquiry and providing an opportunity for PSTs to engage with the *real work of planning an excursion* through *exploring their local environment and finding out more about their neighbourhood's potential as a site of learning*. The assignment was additionally intended to facilitate thorough engagement with the geography curriculum.

Consistent with its importance in the course and, through grades, to PSTs' futures, the assignment documentation was much more comprehensive than the other

artefacts. It began with a statement of purpose, focused on developing capabilities for geographical inquiry, and proceeded to describe two related component tasks. The first task was to undertake a geographical inquiry into a local site the PST believed had potential as a site for a school class inquiry and maintain a journal describing the inquiry process and explaining how it would support inquiry learning relevant to the Australian Curriculum: Geography. The resultant report of 700 words with photos or sketches was to be submitted as the first part of the assignment. The second task (500 words) was to develop plans for a sequence of two geographical inquiry lessons based on the site described in the journal with information about how the lessons would develop students' understanding of geographical inquiry and geographical concepts during and before/after the field trip.

The assignment had a dual focus: PSTs had the opportunity to plan a geographical inquiry at a site within reach of a selected school, but more importantly, PSTs needed to *engage in an inquiry process* themselves *prior to the development of their class inquiry*, thereby enhancing their own understanding of the inquiry process in action. Some PSTs encountered issues that highlighted *their selected inquiry site as unsuitable, such as limited opportunity to explore the geographical concepts, or even issues of student safety. Had they not conducted their own inquiry first, they might have planned a poor lesson.* Conducting fieldwork prior to developing a classroom inquiry *reinforced the benefit of inquiry for teachers in the planning process as well as for students.*

As we reflected on our course feedback, we noted the exclusively positive feedback, with a number of students stating this was one of the best assignments that they had done because it enabled them to experience what it was that their students would experience, including initial discomfort with a new way of learning and the visceral pleasure of being outside learning about something that genuinely interested them. This approach appeared to be significant for preparing students for teaching geography, with one student commenting that *she went to her chosen site at least five times and saw new things every time. This was a place that she had visited often but engaging in the place-based inquiry opened her eyes to look at the site differently.* The benefit of this assignment was that it both assessed the ability of PSTs to engage in inquiry and also supported them in developing understanding of inquiry and related pedagogy. PSTs *noted that they learned more about their local community through the process* (McInerney et al., 2011). The success of the place-based activities within the course was evident in feedback comments from PSTs, which included these excerpts:

> I really feel that the structure of the assignments corresponded perfectly with the content learnt in the modules. The assignments required us to put into practice the skills and knowledge which we learnt. I found this to be beneficial to my learning process.*(Student 1)*

> Inquiry Pedagogy learning achieved through doing Inquiry; Critical Analysis learning achieved through doing Critical Analysis; and Place-Based Education at its best through being immersed in Place-Based Education. *(Student 2)*

> I have 4 primary school aged kids who now use inquiry-based questioning in our family outings to discover a whole range of geographical topics. Thank you. *(Student 3)*

Discussion

This paper reports the authors' experiences with place-based education within the context of a course offered to PSTs in both face-to-face and online modes; however, it is the focus on the ways that these learning experiences helped online students engage in place-based learning that is the real focus. It is not based on the analysis of a large volume of data but on the reflections of the team responsible for design and implementation of the course, supported by feedback comments from participating PSTs.

Our journey began with the recognition of the centrality of place in Geography and of the value of place-based learning through inquiry for addressing geographical concepts. Because the majority of our PSTs enrol in online offers, we were interested to explore whether and how place-based inquiry might work in that environment. Through the reflective and analytic process, we identified three key insights in taking this strategy forward:

Place-based learning experiences can engage online learners in experiential, visceral, personally-relevant learning

As discussed in the literature review, place is a rich concept (ACARA, 2013b; Cameron, 2008; Ingold, 1993; Malpas, 2011; Tuan, 1977; van Eijck & Roth, 2010) with a pedagogical dimension (Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b, 2008). That was evident in our reflections on engagement and responses from PSTs who attested to their expanding interpretations of the places in which they inquired and to an enriched understanding of Geography as a field of study, and moreover, the geographical and educational potential of their own locales. Our observations as educators, and student accounts of having their eyes opened to see familiar sites in new ways and engaging family members in inquiry through embodied action confirmed the pedagogical dimension of place and the benefits of experiential learning (Glazier & Bean, 2019). Our PSTs were not learning *about* place in a dry theoretical way but were learning *in*, *from*, and *through* the places with which they engaged (Nissley, 2011) while integrating theory with practice (Thacher, 2019). In some respects, requiring PSTs to undertake inquiry in their own places and share their experiences may have added to the learning by requiring a degree of independent adaptation that would not be possible if all PSTs engaged in the same place.

Place-based learning experiences helps students to experience inquiry pedagogy in action

Our reflections on the engagement and comments from PSTs about the value of the assignment for experiencing what their students would experience confirmed its value in the course. Its two-phase design with place-based inquiry preceding development of plans for a lesson sequence proved particularly useful when some PSTs discovered that their initial selection of a site was inappropriate for some reason. A key learning for PSTs and team members was thus the value of inquiry as a foundation for preparation in unfamiliar contexts (Thacher, 2019). Student experience of this process, along with the attendant challenges and "aha" moments as learners, then gave them a rich, enacted

understanding that could underpin their meaningful use of inquiry pedagogy as educators in their future classroom.

The impetus for completion of place-based learning experiences, and support for students to complete the tasks, needs to be meaningfully embedded in the course to maximise learning for all students

Despite some initial concerns about the practicalities of attempting place-based learning in the "placeless" online environment, our approach appeared to be effective *for those who completed it*. When comparing the high response rates to both the first task (completed during week one when motivation was high) and third task (assessable and thus mandatory), the low online completion rate of the second task about halfway through the semester stimulated an important reflection on the need to ensure such tasks were explicitly and clearly embedded in the course regarding their value in meeting course learning outcomes. A drop in engagement and completion rates appears to be a common issue with online learning as semester progress (Saqr & Lopez-Pernas, 2021) and students are increasingly unlikely to complete learning tasks unless there is visible connection to course learning outcomes (J. E. Dyment et al., 2020) or assessment (Harris et al., 2018). Burke & Fanshawe's (2021) strategy of praxis-based assessment may prove beneficial in this regard, which promotes the embedding of key learning activities and critical reflection into assessment, ensuring their completion such that all students benefit from the learning. A further consideration is that online learning has been found to widen the divide between students who typically thrive in learning and those who generally do not, with the latter performing worse (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2012). As such, support for learners or potentially flexible ways for students to collaborate – even when not co-located – to reduce feelings of isolation when completing place-based learning tasks should also be considered.

We as authors do not claim that our experience is representative of anything other than our own context or that the findings can be generalised to other contexts. Further, beyond favourable student feedback, the success of this approach has not been measured, and as such, this is a key recommendation for future study. It is our hope that, based on the information provided in this paper, readers may be able to adopt or adapt the activities described to meet the needs of learners in their own contexts and in broader discipline areas, and that wider implementation and evaluation of success will follow this preliminary project. Given the significant global rise of online learning in all sectors of education, and the indication that many educational providers who implemented online learning as an emergency measure during the COVID-19 pandemic are now retaining some form of online and/or hybrid or blended delivery that adopts a combination of face-to-face and online learning (Heng & Sol, 2021), it is hoped that the findings from this paper and the recommendations for pedagogy will prove useful in enhancing the implementation of online learning and overcoming some of the identified challenges for engaging learners.

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