

Land-based education and place-based education: Mapping the terrain and resisting conflation

Melissa Twance, Lakehead University & Will Burton, University of Winnipeg, Canada

Abstract

In recent years there has been growing interest in both land- and place-based education in research, scholarship, and K-12 practice. Yet without robust definitions and guiding principles, land-based education is vulnerable to misinterpretation and cooptation by non-Indigenous practitioners. This article maps the historical and conceptual distinctions between land- and place-based education, with specific focus on the “where,” “what,” “why,” and “how” that orients each field. The authors offer examples of how they have implemented land- and place-based education in their own practice. Ultimately, we argue that while land- and place-based education are both valuable approaches to teaching and learning in the Canadian K-12 system, more careful differentiation is needed.

Résumé

Au cours des dernières, l'éducation fondée sur la terre et l'éducation fondée sur le lieu occupent une place de plus en plus grande en recherche, en sciences de l'éducation et au sein des pratiques pédagogiques au primaire et au secondaire. Toutefois, l'éducation fondée sur la terre, lorsqu'elle n'est pas accompagnée de définitions et de lignes directrices claires, est à risque d'interprétation erronée et de récupération par les éducatrices et éducateurs non autochtones. Cet article schématise les distinctions historiques et culturelles entre les deux approches en se penchant sur le « quoi », le « où », le « pourquoi » et le « comment » qui orientent chacune d'elles. Nous y exposons des exemples d'application de ces deux approches dans notre enseignement. En conclusion, nous plaçons en faveur du recours à ces approches dans le système scolaire canadien à la maternelle, au primaire et au secondaire, tout en insistant sur l'importance de les différencier.

Keywords: Land-based education; place-based education; K-12 education; Indigenous education; Canadian education

Why this Article? Why Now?

All education takes place somewhere. Over the past twenty years, attention has grown around local contexts of schooling and education, particularly around the materiality of land and place. Land-based education (LBE) and place-based education (PBE) have emerged as interventions into abstracted

learning and what Gruenewald (2003a) calls a “placeless” curriculum (p. 8), grounding students and their learning in lived experience and locally specific geospatial and socio-political contexts. The rising interest in land- and place-based education is, therefore, a response to the need for a more meaningful, context-aware approach to teaching and learning, one that acknowledges the importance of specific places in shaping identities, cultures, and knowledge systems.

However, while much has been written around both LBE (e.g., Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019; Ermine, 2024; Hansen, 2018; McDonald, 2023) and PBE (e.g., Anderson, 2017; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Vander Ark et al., 2020), we contend that these approaches to learning remain under-theorized from a practical standpoint, which can be especially problematic for Indigenous education. As Stansberry et al. (2023) assert, “there is no single definition of place-based or land-based education being used to guide research with Indigenous K-12 studies” (p. 168), which has often led to educators and practitioners conflating two very distinct approaches to the role of land and place in learning. With the recent rise in popularity of land-based approaches to learning, some scholars warn about the possibility of “co-opting” this pedagogy without fully understanding the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems (Cluderay et al., 2022). Both of us feel it prudent that scholars and practitioners proceed with a robust understanding of how these two approaches intersect and, more importantly, how they diverge. In this article, we ask: What are the conceptual distinctions between LBE and PBE and what does that mean for practitioners? In posing this question, we intend to further theorize and delineate land-based and place-based approaches to learning, paying particular attention to the distinct worldviews and objectives that animate these pedagogies.

Based on our experiences designing and teaching LBE and PBE courses for in-service K-12 teachers in central Canada, we suggest that the key distinction between these approaches arises from their ontological orientations, particularly in how land, place, and knowledge are understood. While LBE and PBE may overlap in practice and pedagogy, their orientations shape both how pedagogy is enacted and the kinds of relationships formed with land, community, and knowledge. We contend that one cannot easily replace or stand in for the other and that these approaches require more careful differentiation to avoid collapsing their ontological differences in practice. To make this case, we attend to the conceptual distinctions and places of overlap, delineating the “where,” “what,” “why,” and “how” that orient each field. It is our contention that all students in the Canadian education system would benefit from both of these approaches, but educators and practitioners need more awareness of how LBE and PBE differ in their orientations to knowledge, land, and learning and what the implications are for their practice.

Positioning

An anchor for this paper is recognizing that our lived experiences as educators are tied to the responsibilities we carry, and that these in turn influence how we navigate our work. Melissa is an Anishinaabe scholar and writer from the Netmizaagamig Nishnaabeg community in Northwestern Ontario. Her work explores Indigenous knowledge systems, pedagogies, and critical unschooling. Will is a settler scholar who immigrated to Manitoba from England as a youth. His current work focuses on place-based pedagogies, climate change education, and interdisciplinary approaches to the K-12 curriculum. We aim to bring these fields into dialogue to shape educational frameworks that are culturally accountable and responsive to learners' needs, identities, and aspirations.

The impetus for this paper came from our experience of considering the epistemological and ontological roots of our respective course curricula. It began with an honest question from a colleague who asked if our course content would be different enough from one another, indicating a preconceived notion that land and place were essentially the same. This question turned into an earnest dialogue about the perceived similarities between land- and place-based learning, like cultivating relationships and a sense of community, critical inquiry, and experiential learning. There are also significant differences, yet we have found these two approaches are often conflated with one another despite differences in their ontological and epistemological orientations.

To explore these tensions, we reviewed and synthesized the literature, citing influential works in both Indigenous land- and place-based education. We paid attention to how each study defined, operationalized, and applied land- or place-based education in real-world teaching settings. We critically examined the existing definitions and interpretations of the two learning approaches, identifying areas of overlap and divergence, noting instances where the terms were used interchangeably and identifying potential misconceptions. This process helped us to clearly differentiate the approaches, highlighting their distinct characteristics and the pedagogical implications of conflating them.

Mapping the Conceptual Terrain

LBE and PBE approaches both emphasize local relationships and community engagement, yet they emerge from distinct conceptual frameworks. Land-based approaches to education are derived from centuries-old Indigenous educational practices, rooted in specific, local relationships with the land (Bowra et al., 2021). These relationships are often understood as reciprocal, involving not only human communities, but the more-than-human world that includes animals, plants, and the land itself. Today, these approaches are attuned to (re)asserting Indigenous presence and fostering meaningful cultural relationships

with lands and ancestral territories (McDonald, 2023). As such, LBE is often viewed as a means of sustaining Indigenous cultures and supporting a holistic view of community well-being that extends beyond human needs (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019).

PBE is a more contemporary approach to teaching and learning in K-12 schools (and elsewhere), emerging in the 1990s and growing out of and alongside environmental and civic education (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Targeting the intersection of communities and ecosystems, PBE sought to address the disconnect between what young people were learning in classrooms with the world beyond the school walls, paying particular attention to the local, emphasizing the need to build relationships with community and heal the natural world, predominately to support human health (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). PBE is informed by experiential learning and inquiry or project-based approaches (Vander Ark et al., 2020; Yemini et al., 2025).

Despite these distinctions, the conceptual boundaries between LBE and PBE remain blurred, and the lack of distinct and unified definitions complicates the comparison and measurement of outcomes (Stansberry et al., 2023). In the next section, we dig into the differences between these two approaches to articulate the specific goals, objectives, and orientations of each.

Different Roots

While scholars have been theorizing Indigenous approaches to learning and to the natural world for several decades (e.g., Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2004; Cajete, 1994; Kirkness, 1981; Simpson, 2001), “land-based education” as a term has been applied widely and loosely, including outside of Indigenous circles. Thus, finding consistent wording for land-based programs and initiatives can be challenging. As Redvers (2016) indicates, various disciplines, agencies, and organizations have employed a variety of terms to describe learning that happens on the land, including wilderness, nature-based, environmental, outdoor, Land, and land-based education.

Most often, LBE is used to refer to any education or learning that takes place on the land and immerses students in nature (see, for example, Card & Burke, 2021). In practice, this has come to include working with students to build ecological knowledge and cultural skills, (re)establishing or maintaining connections to land, and developing curriculum and lessons that blend Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (Lowan-Trudeau, 2013). However, as Macdonald (2023) asserts, LBE is not simply teaching and learning outdoors, rather it is an orientation to learning that must be rooted in Indigenous onto-epistemologies.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Indigenous peoples throughout North America experienced what has been characterized as a “renaissance,” marked by a florescence of literature, rapid politicization, and cultural renewal (Cook-Lynn, 1996; Nagel, 1995; Warrior, 1995). This era saw an increase in urbanization

for Indigenous peoples and a rising number of high school and post-secondary students who began to grow weary of tribal leaders caught up in federal bureaucracy (Cardinal, 1969; Nagel, 1995; Steiner, 1968). For LBE, the most relevant impacts of this tumultuous period were three-fold: first, a nationalistic political identity was formed, making it possible to describe the “political reality of ‘being Indigenous’” for the first time (Niezen, 2000, p. 120). Second, political and academic leaders advanced the argument that land is central to Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination to counter ongoing threats to Indigenous land bases and land rights (Burke, 1976; Fidler, 1970; Steiner, 1968). Third, Indigenous activists began their calls for cultural renewal and the redefinition of education that opposed assimilation and centered Indigenous ways of being and doing (e.g. Adams, 1975; Cardinal, 1969).

Indigenous critiques of the education system carried into the 1990s, with a push for culturally-relevant pedagogies (Dawson, 1988; Maina, 1997), increased control of Indian education (Hampton, 1995; Kirkness, 1998), and the recognition and employment of Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and methods in both research and education (Battiste, 1998; Simpson, 2001). This push was supported by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples which “unequivocally embraced the importance of IK [Indigenous knowledge] in the reconciliation and renewal of relations with Aboriginal peoples” (Battiste & Henderson, 2009, p. 6). LBE emerged within this context, rooted in critiques of colonial education and the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

Because of this context, we understand Land as something more than place, representing a web of relationships that are inextricably linked to one another. This understanding of land is also enfolded within a socio-political history that has dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their connections to land and place. As Wildcat et al. (2014) note, “if colonization is fundamentally about dispossessing Indigenous peoples from land, decolonization must involve forms of education that reconnect Indigenous peoples to land and the social relations, knowledge, and languages that arise from the land” (p. i). A vital part of LBE is the resurgence of cultural practices that foster connections and relationships to self, identity, community, as well as land. LBE’s commitment to localized curricula is necessary because at its core, its pedagogy is rooted in the specific landscapes, waters, and territories of Indigenous nations. What sets LBE apart from PBE approaches is its reliance on intergenerational knowledge, languages, and customary practices that have developed in relationship with those lands over time. This foundation of cultural continuity and historical connection is central to LBE and distinguishes it from broader place-based approaches that may not always integrate the same depth of cultural and ecological reciprocity.

While LBE is rooted in Indigenous knowledges, practices, and political struggles for sovereignty, PBE emerged in response to compulsory school attendance laws and the observation that what happened in school was often divorced from the lives of students outside of the classroom (Smith, 2016).

Early scholars began to theorize educational approaches that emphasized how local culture and history directly related to the lives of students and their communities. The evolution of PBE can be marked by three periods, each informed by related theories or practices: community revitalization, the critical turn, and settler-colonialism.

Although traces of PBE go as far back as the post-war period when Newman and Oliver (1967) claimed that the “fundamental objective of education is the development of individual human dignity, or self-realization within community” (p. 61), it was established as a pedagogical theory in the late 20th century with Orr’s (1992) call for a more concerted effort to situate K-12 learning outside the classroom. This was followed by Theobald (1997), who argued for K-12 classroom teachers to “focus their pedagogical energy on the immediate place inhabited by the school; that is, they must make the word local in the phrase ‘local school’ mean something” (p. 1), where education systems and the community would collaborate towards a “democratic imperative” (p. 114). If not always explicitly stated, this call was also grounded in recognition that globalization had led to the deindustrialization of some communities in North America (Sobel, 2013).

Theobald’s (1997) work was followed by Gruenewald/Greenwood (2003a, 2003b) who built off the “spatial turn” of the late 20th century and considered how human thought and action were informed by the built environment. Critical geographers such as Davies (2006), Harvey (2010, 2012), and Haymes (1995) began theorizing how human-made constructs – cultural, economic, and historical – controlled people and populations to maintain structural oppression. By the late 20th and early 21st century, progressive educational scholars and practitioners picked up the potential for youth to engage more deeply in what was happening in their communities (human and more-than-human), and why (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003a). Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b) specifically called for environmental education and critical pedagogy to work together with place as the focus for inquiry and action.

As PBE attracted more attention, Indigenous scholars and critical educators (Bang et al., 2014; Calderon, 2014) contested some of the assumptions of PBE, calling out its silence on the historical and contemporary violence that settler-colonialism brought to North America, questioning the extent to which PBE perpetuates white-European normativity and erases Indigenous peoples and their claims to place (Tuck et al., 2014; Schindel Dimick, 2016). As a result, this third iteration of PBE increasingly integrated critical attention to settler-colonialism into its theory and practice (Greenwood, 2019; Scully, 2020). However, while PBE is evolving to address these concerns, it can still overlook the depth of Indigenous sovereignty and relationships with land that LBE explicitly emphasizes.

The disparate origins of each approach are not the only distinguishable characteristics between LBE and PBE. To further clarify the distinctions between land- and place-based education, the following section examines and maps out the “where”, “what”, “why”, and “how” that orient each field. This structure

serves as a framework to highlight key differences while acknowledging intersections and overlaps between both approaches.

Conceptual Landmarks

WHERE: Defining Land and Place. LBE and PBE both reject abstract, detached views of land but they diverge in where meaning and agency are located. The term *land* is often used to refer to a physical or geographic location, but Indigenous paradigms see beyond material definitions of land as object, resource, or property and take a more holistic view of land as kin, embodied through a network of relationships that includes plants, animals, natural elements (i.e. air, water, minerals), spirits, ancestors, as well as human beings (McDonald, 2023; see also Zinga & Styres, 2011). Land, in this context, is grounded in culturally-rooted, interdependent relationships between all living beings and their situated environment. For Indigenous peoples, land is literally spirit and culture (Ermine, 1995; Haig-Brown & Hodson, 2009). Further, Redvers (2016) points out that land-based “doesn’t automatically assume an on the land location”, suggesting that “fundamentally, land-based connection can take place anywhere... because we aren’t never separate from the land in the first place” (p. 75). By affirming that all land is Indigenous land, LBE disrupts the urban/rural binary, emphasizing that humans are always embedded in ongoing, constitutive, material, and ethical relationships with land, regardless of location (Bang et al., 2014; McDonald, 2023).

In contrast, *place* is constituted through human interpretation and meaning-making (Tuan, 1977). Space becomes place “when we get to know it better and endow it with meaning” (p. 6), rather than reflecting relationships that are understood to exist prior to and beyond human experience. *Place* is often used interchangeably with *community* (Sobel & Smith, 2010), but they are distinct terms because *place* is used to more broadly to encompass a range of sites that do not neatly confine to the definition of community (Siskar, 2008). For PBE to be meaningful to students, it often seeks to focus on places within a community in which students reside or schools are located. Here, through teacher or student-led inquiry, curriculum is meaningfully connected to context and utilized as a location or context for deeper understanding and application of learning. As meaning-making develops, the place or places that serve to focus the inquiry may lead students to shift from a passive to a deeper more holistic understanding. Here, we can see PBE often deploys humanistic interpretations, emphasizing the role of human experience in constituting place. However, Indigenous conceptions of land as kin articulate a fundamentally different relational ontology in which land is not an object of human meaning, but a living, agential relation.

WHAT: Core Processes and Community Foundations. In practice, both LBE and PBE organize learning around specific sites, activities, and relationships, utilizing the surrounding environment and community as active partners in teaching and learning. A key difference lies in who the educators are, what

resources are drawn upon, and how learning activities are structured. Taken together, these organizing principles constitute the pedagogy of each approach. LBE differs from dominant Western educational traditions not in its use of experiential or situated learning, but by grounding knowledge within a relational ontology that understands land as the “first teacher” (Styres, 2011) and as an active interface for learning (Simpson, 2014). Learning with the land is therefore understood as a holistic, relational, and embodied experience (Cluderay et al., 2022). LBE relies on Elders, knowledge keepers, and the land itself to impart knowledge. Elders are important teachers because they have lived on and with the land their whole lives. They pass on their teachings by modeling behaviors, demonstrating skills, and sharing stories while being out on the land, in situ. It then becomes the responsibility of each learner to participate in a “perpetual cycle of observing, listening, doing, and sharing” (Cluderay et al., 2022, p. 55) for themselves. Within this model of learning, typical classroom hierarchies between those considered “experts” and learners are disrupted, reflecting a relational understanding of knowledge in which expertise is not fixed in individuals but emerges through ongoing relations among people, land, and practice. Community members are recognized as teachers, and knowledge moves fluidly across and within generations rather than being fixed within particular roles or age groups.

Places are pedagogical, writes Gruenewald (2003a); inherent in this claim is that people can learn differently, if not more effectively, in place, by attending to and being-in-place. This perspective provokes (re)conceptualizing teaching and learning that takes place in places, *with* places and *for* the benefit of places. Learning begins with an examination of the places in which students reside, whether that be neighborhoods or locations of cultural, economic, environmental, or historical significance beyond immediate proximity to schools or students but nevertheless of relevance. Like LBE, there are repeating cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 2014). Resources in PBE may include people and institutions such as libraries, museums, community centers, businesses, and government agencies. While this work can occur inside classrooms, PBE literature generally advocates for getting youth outside of the school building where they can learn *in situ* (Anderson, 2017; Vander Ark et al., 2020).

WHY: Teaching and Learning Outcomes. LBE programs are often oriented around multiple outcomes and intentions. In her review of land-based programs in the Canadian North, Redvers (2016) found that funded initiatives have addressed diverse needs, including “suicide prevention, outdoor leadership, land and science education, intergenerational cultural continuity, and healing from residential school experiences” (p. 25). These initiatives have frequently been designed to support student well-being by fostering connections to the natural world, alongside Indigenous cultural education grounded in land-based and traditional skills.

Likewise, McDonald's (2023) review of Indigenous LBE identified four themes related to programming goals and outcomes. These included: 1) Indigenous self-determination; 2) health and well-being; 3) environmental stewardship; and 4) reconciliation and climate justice. These varied outcomes and intentions demonstrate how LBE is responsive to and grounded in differing community needs. Rather than a singular educational approach, LBE has been understood as both a nation-building practice tied to forms of Indigenous governance (Simpson, 2014; Yerxa, 2014) and a holistic, socio-cultural process that grounds learning in relational contexts (Bowra et al., 2021). As McDonald (2023) suggests, LBE is "a way to transform and restore humanity's relationship to land" (p. 4). The aims of LBE are firmly rooted in support for Indigenous self-determination, strengthening relationships to land, and fostering holistic well-being through relational ways of learning.

PBE draws on several pedagogical approaches familiar to progressive models of K-12 education that explicitly disrupt normative notions of what content is valued and which pedagogies constitute effective teaching strategies. One concept that is central to PBE theory is Gruenewald's (2003b) definition of 'place-consciousness', which is particularly insightful:

[It works] against the isolation of schooling's discourses and practices from the living world outside the increasingly placeless institution of schooling. Furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there. (p. 620)

Pathways towards cultivating place-consciousness including "enlist[ing] teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there" (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 620) offering a "vibrant counterpoint" (p. 621) to traditional approaches. These educators might be guided by a series of questions Greenwood (2013) posits: what happened here? (historical); what is happening here now and in what direction is this place headed? (socioecological); and what should happen here? (ethical). In this way, PBE can be utilized as a tool for "unsettling" colonized places, and in recent years, scholarship has actively pursued this line of inquiry (see Conrad, 2022; Seawright & Hayes, 2025).

More recently and partly in response to important critiques from Indigenous scholars, some practitioners of PBE have understood that to live well in and with a place, understandings of the first inhabitants and caretakers of places before European settlement is a critical foundation. Understanding Canadian history and treaties, participating in reconciliation, and supporting resurgence is stronger when the temporal intersects with the spatial. The ultimate aims of PBE are that the knowledge, skills and attitudes developed by learning in and with places during the K-12 education system will bridge into adulthood. To this end, PBE can be an effective tool in teaching for reconciliation (Burton, forthcoming; Poitras-Pratt & Bodnaresko, 2023).

HOW: Practices in the Field. LBE is not confined to formal K–12 curriculum contexts but is instead enacted across a range of educational and community-based settings, including non-profit organizations, local Indigenous governments, collectives, and informal, ad hoc groups (McDonald, 2023). Most often, programming is focused on taking youth out on the land to participate in traditional skills like hunting, fishing, trapping, processing game, and/or harvesting and processing plant foods and medicine. Other programs are less intensive and involve land-based activities situated within the school or local community, like students working with Elders to build an igloo on school grounds (Snow & Obed, 2022) or planting a community garden together (Lever, 2020). These examples illustrate forms of situated and experiential learning that are also common in PBE. In the context of LBE, however, these activities are situated as part of broader relational engagements with land, where learning is not only situated in place, but constituted through relationships with land, Elders, and community, including more-than-human beings. At times, these practices may be constrained by school commitment to mainstream curricula, limited funding, or policy restrictions around logistics and safety concerns (Bowra et al., 2021; Redvers, 2016; Snow & Obed, 2022).

Unlike LBE, PBE practitioners may not necessarily seek to fundamentally transform the underlying structures of state-sanctioned education but instead operate within existing curricular and institutional frameworks (Vander Ark et al., 2020; Yemini et al., 2023). For example, PBE has been deployed across a range of disciplines, including English language arts (Mendoza, 2018; Wason-Ellam, 2014), environmental studies (Hutson, 2011; Mnyusiwalla & Bardecki, 2017; Sturrock & Zandvliet, 2023), fine arts (Brook, 2016; Inwood, 2008), mathematics (Showalter, 2013), science (Semken et al., 2017; Winters, 2022), and social studies (Anderson, 2017; Senechal as cited in Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Some examples of place-based learning include early-years students mapping their community and connecting with businesses and organizations that support newcomers (Anderson, 2017); middle-years students learning from elders and developing personal territorial land acknowledgements (Burton, forthcoming); and high school students collecting air quality data from a neighborhood and advocating politically at the municipal level for improved public transit (Senechal as cited in Gruenewald & Smith, 2008).

In these contexts, PBE grounds curriculum in local places and communities while remaining aligned with prescribed learning outcomes and standards. While some critical strands of PBE explicitly challenge dominant educational structures (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008), curricular adaptation often remains the focus, rather than systemic transformation. While barriers such as transportation or admission costs can be prohibitive, the siloed and timetabled school schedule is often a bigger barrier to facilitating sustained experiences beyond the school building. K-12 PBE teachers can still work towards undoing the “placelessness” of curriculum by contextualizing curriculum to the local.

Putting Theories into Practice

In the summer of 2024, both authors had the opportunity to facilitate two different courses on land- and place-based education to in-service K-12 teachers as part of the post-baccalaureate in education diploma (PBDE) program at the University of Winnipeg. In this next section, we share our personal experiences of teaching our respective courses to both explain our perspectives and approaches to learning and to demonstrate how land- and place-based education were differentiated and practiced between us.

Melissa: Land-Based Pedagogy and Anishinaabe Art Practices

Approach. This course was designed to introduce students to customary Anishinaabe art practices, like basketry, quillwork, and beading, as an expression of land-based pedagogy. I wanted students to consider aspects of land-based learning by directly engaging in hands-on skills and developing relational awareness to land within Winnipeg. Anishinaabe art practices are slow and intentional. Their materials, forms, and aesthetics are deeply rooted in the land they derive from, and it was this relationality and intentionality that underpinned the course.

Implementation. Our course had several learning objectives: 1) to explore foundational principles of land-based pedagogy; 2) to identify traditional knowledge embodied in Anishinaabe art practices; 3) to utilize and gain experience in working with natural materials sourced from plants and animals; and 4) for students to develop a habit of critical reflection of their place in the world and the relationship between land and their own lives. Throughout the 8 weeks, teaching moved fluidly between classroom discussion and land-based engagement. Readings and discussions that took place during classroom sessions critically framed land as politically and culturally embedded. We explored ethical relationships with natural materials, considered the agency of more-than-human beings, and discussed our responsibilities as kin. This provided theoretical framing for our field experiences and linked Indigenous art and craft practices to LBE theory and Anishinaabe worldview. Field days consisted of land encounters in the morning and studio-based work in the afternoons. This provided experiential, hands-on learning to practice relational engagement with both land and materials. Students practiced relational awareness with plants, animals, and water ecosystems while engaging with plant and animal-sourced materials in culturally informed ways. These field experiences allowed students to have direct, relational experiences with land that later informed their creative work in the class.

Assessments included a self-positioning assignment as an introduction to relationality, where students had to consider the people, places, practices, and things that have shaped them into who they are. Students were also assessed based on reflective writing that served to decenter the instructor

as the “expert in the room,” allowing students to explore and articulate how knowledge arises through embodied, sensorial experience. In their final projects, students were asked to complete a creative work utilizing skills taught in class, accompanied by a reflective essay that described how this course experience altered, influenced, strengthened, or validated their personal philosophy and relationship with land.

Challenges. The main challenge encountered in this course was attempting to disrupt the assumption that land is separate from urban environments, or that authentic LBE can only occur in rural or remote settings. This binary shaped some of my own assumptions and was evident in our classroom discussions, particularly around what counts as “legitimate” engagement with land. Working with a relational understanding of land meant unlearning these distinctions and recognizing that LBE is not limited to subsistence-based activities like hunting, trapping, or gathering.

Will: Places are Pedagogical: An Introduction to Place-based Education

Approach. This course was designed to build foundational knowledge on PBE theory, providing concrete examples through text and field experiences, and strengthening teachers’ knowledge about place, specifically Winnipeg, where all teachers were currently assigned. As I sought to model PBE on location, the five full days emphasized experiential course design.

Implementation. An introduction to settler-colonialism and PBE theory prefaced the course. Students were tasked with responding to Sinclair’s (2023) call for shifting away from tokenistic territorial acknowledgements in favor of those that held personal stories, recognition of land, people and personal action in meeting the Truth and Reconciliation’s Calls to Action (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The link between settler-colonialism and the local context was complemented by readings from Toews (2018) whose text on racial capitalism in Winnipeg was read and discussed.

Building on this were readings and discussions on PBE theory. Seawright’s (2014) paper on the three camps of PBE, coupled with Gruenewald’s (2003a) critical pedagogy of place framed PBE’s origins and how content and pedagogies can shift towards engaging critically with place, particularly given the context of settler colonialism which continues to permeate K-12 schools and communities in Winnipeg.

With these ideas in mind, we spent a second day at The Forks, a place loaded with meaning at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. It has been a meeting place for Indigenous peoples from time immemorial and is known as the historical birthplace for Winnipeg. Students participated in a Métis Walking tour led by a local Indigenous K-12 teacher, who dwelled with us in specific historical spaces and shared personal stories that provided contextual details. This was juxtaposed with a boat tour that provided a “touristy” perspective on Winnipeg’s history from the river.

In the second half of the week, readings and field experiences were designed to draw in ecological shifts seen in Winnipeg. Our class spent time learning with the Red River with an educational program coordinator from an outdoor learning center, who guided us through a series of water testing experiments. This led to conversations about how humans have transformed the environment in various ways, including terraforming and the seepage of industrial chemicals and human waste into local water systems. Seeing how Winnipeg could be many places simultaneously – Manitoba, Treaty 1, Lake Winnipeg Watershed, prairie ecozone, distinct political and zoned boundaries – offering different ways for students to understand this place through both a Euro-centric and Indigenous lens.

PBE theorists have offered that one way to have young people care for places is for them to dwell in them repeatedly over time (Gruenewald, 2003a; Orr, 1992). In a week-long course, located on a university campus that students had little connection to, how could I meet this aspiration? I decided to embed three visits across the week to an Indigenous Learning Garden that had been established a few years prior. In this place our class met on the first day to share their personal connection to place; on the third day students used an app featuring local elders that explored the Indigenous plant life in the garden, learning Anishinaabe words for the native plants; and on the third day, each student was invited to share their reflections and key takeaways from the week.

Challenges. Despite strong positive feedback from students, the course presented two challenges. Firstly, an intensive course denied a sustained inquiry over an extended period of time. Providing an understanding of PBE theory, exploration of Winnipeg as a pedagogical location, and providing bite sized examples of practice was deemed to be a more effective use of time. Secondly, the course was more accessible to those students who were familiar with and practicing inquiry approaches to teaching and learning, which is foundational to much PBE practice. Requesting inquiry or project-based courses as a prerequisite and offering the course over a semester would greatly benefit students and mirror actual PBE education practices in the K-12 system.

Implications

Taken together, our experiences illustrate how our ontological orientations shaped not only course design and classroom practice, but the kinds of relationships students and teachers develop with land, place, and knowledge. Melissa focused on developing students' relational awareness with land through customary arts practices and by ethically engaging with natural materials. While academic scholarship provided theoretical framing, this course was firmly grounded in Anishinaabe worldview. Through multisensorial, embodied experiences, students reflected upon their roles within and ethical responsibilities towards land. Will created a course that critically framed PBE theory to address settler

colonialism and the history that lead to the founding of Winnipeg. Through a layered exploration of Winnipeg as place, students were introduced to key tenets of PBE that included respectful inclusion of Indigenous peoples and perspectives. To say that our approaches within our respective courses are one and the same obscures and flattens the differences in our purpose, perspective, and worldview. These experiences highlight how LBE and PBE are guided by distinct ontological orientations that cultivate ethical, relational, and contextual learning in unique ways. Recognizing these differences is essential for educators who seek to implement these pedagogies thoughtfully and with intention.

Where now?

As we have noted, scholarship on LBE and PBE has steadily grown over the years, resulting in greater application of these pedagogies (Bowra et al., 2021; Yemini et al., 2025). This includes public education in our home of Winnipeg, where school divisions are taking seriously the importance of Indigenous education broadly and LBE more specifically (Anderson, 2024; Macintosh, 2024). Both of us are excited by this shift as it reflects a broader recognition of the importance of community-based and culturally-relevant pedagogies. These approaches challenge traditional modes of teaching and learning that have potential for harm and move us towards an education system grounded in an ethics of care for one another, for our communities, and for the environment.

We stress that in an education system dominated by settler educators (Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle, 2024; Skelton & McMahon-Flett, 2025), Euro-centric curriculum, and unequal power structures, care must be taken to avoid appropriating or co-opting programs like LBE. In a settler-colonial state that continues to struggle with the legacy of genocide against Indigenous peoples and ongoing violence against the natural world, PBE practitioners can learn from LBE, while respecting the cultural boundaries that distinguish the two approaches.

We take heed from Tuck and Yang's (2012) notion of settler "moves to innocence" whereby settler educators adopt Indigenous content and pedagogies to absolve themselves of the harms of the Canadian settler-state without meaningfully challenging the structures that perpetuate settler-colonialism. We argue that LBE represents a distinct orientation to learning, grounded in and informed by Indigenous worldviews that currently have not been fully realized within contemporary schooling systems. While elements of PBE may share overlapping practices in its more critical or progressive forms, LBE differs in its ontological grounding and in its refusal to position land as merely contextual to learning.

Our intention with this article has been to prompt educators and practitioners to be clear about what they are engaging in when they say they are doing LBE or PBE and to think more deeply about the implications of their practice. We argue that the ontological differences are vulnerable to being

flattened when not attended to properly. Land- and place-based education offer distinct but overlapping approaches to teaching and learning that both have the potential to have significant benefits for young people and the communities in which they inhabit. Our hope is that non-Indigenous educators will find ways to bring Indigenous perspectives into their work in respectful, engaging, and thoughtful ways without engaging in damaging forms of cultural appropriation or co-optation.

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