Disrupting the Traditional Learning Paradigm: Place-Based Learning as Transformational Space

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ABSTRACT

In his keynote address at the Mokakiiks Symposium for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Banff, Alberta, Randy Bass called for "disruptive innovations" in learning. In this response, we suggest that place-based learning may be one of these disruptive innovations. Place-based learning goes beyond the learning paradigm by challenging students to partner with community members in a specific place, to learn through interacting with the people and spaces, and to think like agents of change. Working as co-designers, we as faculty, students, and community stakeholders become partners to promote learning and the transformation of individuals and places. Using place-based learning in the university setting facilitates the application of global, generalizable knowledge to the specifics of local people and places, creating hope for solutions that address the local realities of the world's wicked challenges.

Keywords: place-based learning, community engagement, student development, impact, pedagogy, education reform

Nine years ago, we faced classes of students who signed up to learn about entrepreneurship for non-business majors, but whose patent lack of engagement showed that they were not learning from our in-class, project-based curriculum. We needed to change our curriculum to focus on the students sitting in the class and not stick to the curriculum we designed for our imagined proto-entrepreneurs. As Randy Bass compellingly explained, we needed to let go of the instructional paradigm and find a new way to engage the students in learning. So we took a walk down Main Street,[1] engaging the students in "seeing" the place not as a local consumer, but through the lens of a community stakeholder (McArdle & de Koning, 2022). The experience not only transformed the students' engagement and learning, it also transformed us. Nine years later, we have become advocates for *learning in places*, encouraging our colleagues to partner with students and community members to collaboratively design place-based learning processes and support developing students' capacities as agents of change. Bass's challenge to go beyond the learning paradigm resonated with our experiences and also inspired us to articulate a holistic vision of place-based learning that can be applied by faculty across the university. What we found, and find, compelling about locating learning in a place-based context resonates with the important contributions that Bass makes.

Bass's work encouraged us to conceptualize *learning in places* as a pedagogy "beyond the learning paradigm" (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bass, 2022). In this essay, we follow the structure of Bass's presentation, which argues for pedagogical innovations that prepare students for the unexpected. We also use his frameworks to explore the characteristics of learning in a place-based context that honours the unique characteristics and relationships of communities that live and work there. We note areas where our approach is congruent with the challenge Bass issued, namely, to design learning experiences that go beyond knowledge transfer and support students' abilities to contextualize and synthesize knowledge and make a difference in society. We believe that place-based approaches offer an alternative to traditional notions of the role of university education. Every place is different, and we believe that students who learn to approach places with a spirit of appreciative inquiry, and perhaps even a sense of wonder, are more likely to address the world's challenges with solutions designed to fit the world's unique spaces.

Bass introduced his talk by reviewing how Barr and Tagg (1995) instigated a shift away from a paradigm of instruction and toward a learning paradigm. For this essay, we highlight five features from Barr and Tagg's discussion: "produce learning, elicit student discovery, create learning environments, achieve success for diverse students, …. [and recognize] faculty are primarily designers" (pp. 16–17). In typical universities, these student-centred priorities still take place in the context of courses and programs, and faculty are paid to instruct students in the knowledge base of their disciplines. The shift to a new learning paradigm has not significantly

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[1] We use the term "Main Street" to indicate a street that is significant to a municipality. We initially walked down Main Street in Gloucester, MA, and since then we have walked streets with our students in Northeast Massachusetts and in Calgary, AB.

changed the structures of the university, but increasingly new institutions such as Mount Royal University's Mokakiiks Centre, the University of Calgary's Taylor Institute, and Georgetown's Red House Incubator are driving change across the faculties by encouraging faculty to experiment, integrate field-tested approaches to high-impact learning, and focus more explicitly on student outcomes.

Much like Sharpe et al.'s (2016) Three Horizons thinking, Bass sees the seeds of the future for education as holistic, equitable, harmonic, compassionate, full of hope for humanity, and serving society and the planet. These values, he argues, build on current practices such as students as partners (SaP) and scaled up high-impact practices (HIPs). Indeed, we increasingly see students in our classes who openly discuss a desire to use their education to make an impact in society, and they are intentional in seeking learning experiences that reflect these goals and values. Bass notes that that universities need to introduce significant innovations in response to global challenges, in some ways a return to the public intellectualism and contributions to society that made universities such an important social force in the mid-20th century, when universities were laboratories for innovation not only in advancing technology and social justice, but also in developing new ways of organizing opportunities for learning (Bass, 2020; Bass 2022). Innovations in learning and teaching can be disruptive, of course, as they challenge the status quo of traditional methods of instruction. But that disruption can be a powerful catalyst for change. Universities that support experimentation and growth in learning paradigms are better positioned to cope with the inevitable disruptions caused by these innovations. And while not all innovations will survive, the hope is to harness the energy generated by these approaches to achieve the future values of healthier people and places, and develop the third horizon (Sharpe et al., 2016, as cited in Bass, 2022).

One of those innovations is place-based learning, which situates a course or a program into specific neighbourhoods (Butler & Sinclair, 2020). These approaches allow instructors to use place as text (Braid & Long, 2010; Pederson et al., 2022), place as learning laboratory (Hamilton & Marckini-Polk, 2023), and/or place as a vehicle for grounding abstract concepts in a known context (Vander Ark et al., 2020). These pedagogical approaches are transdisciplinary, and, when done well, they share a common element of intentionally using place as a context for learning that helps ground disciplinary or course content within a known experience (Butler & Sinclair, 2020).

In our entrepreneurship courses, for example, we select two neighbourhoods (for 30–50 students, working in groups of 4–6), and our course explores how businesses start and grow within the context of stakeholders of the place. We address the learning objective through a series of experiences, assignments, speakers, and discussions that draw on the neighbourhood as a textual frame for knowledge building. One interesting outcome of the process that typically happens is the realization that cooperation is critical to the survival and growth of the businesses and organizations in the neighbourhood—challenging the assumption of competition in most business courses. The process changes the typical perspectives

on stakeholder relationships and analysis that places the firm at the centre of the model and identifies stakeholder relationships as things to be managed, and instead centres community stakeholders when analyzing challenges and identifies how the firm can become one of the stakeholders of the community (McArdle & de Koning, 2022). Appropriate conceptual frameworks are provided and students are also encouraged to bring other knowledge they deem valuable into their team project work and into class discussions. At the end of the course, the students' assessment is based on their recommendations for how to resolve community challenges and identify appropriate new businesses for the neighbourhood. Their perspectives and suggestions help the learning experience to evolve, both for themselves and for students in future iterations of the course. As compared to a typical classroom-based approach to teaching these concepts, which are core learning outcomes in entrepreneurship curricula, learning outcomes from a place-based approach are unique in the development of a deeper understanding of the significant role that local context, community networks, and social relationships play in the success or failure of a proposal for change, value proposition, or business idea.

In the course we teach, the students are generally asked to spend time physically engaging with a particular neighbourhood. They walk several blocks of a downtown business district, creating a field map of the businesses that currently exist, thinking about the ways in which the businesses provide clues about the neighbourhood, its residents, and the socioeconomic and sociopolitical nature of the place. They consider the ways in which the businesses might be "complementary" businesses, such as a corner market, a hardware store, and a coffee shop, which attract a common type of customer or serve community needs that complement one another. They listen to shopkeepers, customers, community members, and government officials who share information about the nature of the community and the unique characteristics it embodies. They are challenged to think about ways to "improve" the neighbourhood—perhaps by recommending enterprises that would fit within the current mix of businesses or suggesting infrastructure changes (e.g., parking, public spaces, streetscape, lighting, etc.) that might lead to more positive outcomes. The goal of these exercises is to teach concepts such as opportunity recognition and analysis, feasibility analysis, networking for professional purposes, strategic thinking, and critical analysis. These concepts are usually covered in these types of courses, but we embed them within a textual framework that uses the place as a context for understanding. As we have written elsewhere when describing this approach, situating the lessons within a physical space produces some additional outcomes that suggest deeper levels of personal and professional development among the students (McArdle & de Koning, 2022).

As this example illustrates, place-based learning can provide a broader and more holistic understanding of course content for learners, allowing them to see and explore ways of being and to engender change in the specifics of a community or a place. We note that most of Bass's seeds of the future (Bass, 2022) are the characteristics of an active community member, connected and concerned and contributing alongside others. This kind of connection challenges the abstractness

of global thinking; indeed, many well-intentioned solutions fail because of a lack of nuance and localization to place and people, causing unintended harm. The global challenges of climate change and growing populations require solutions that are locally relevant, and this tension between broad, generalizable knowledge and the particularities of applications of knowledge in specific places is exactly where the university is best situated. Using place-based approaches, students can learn to apply, integrate, and gain globally relevant knowledge by engaging in learning experiences that are situated in local places.

Bass further implies that soft reform to address world challenges is not enough, that we need a phase of radical reform to effect change. The argument is that radical reform questions the basic assumptions we make about society's structures and systems, and that without challenging the basic assumptions that undergird the structures of society we cannot expect to reach the vision of a better emerging future. Those outcomes will require shifts in power, hierarchy, and roles far beyond the scope of individual actors (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, as cited in Bass, 2022). In a university context, radical reform of the dominant instructional paradigms may be needed to develop more robust pedagogical approaches to educating for impact, which addresses the challenge issued by Barr and Tagg (1995) that inspired Bass to develop his theory and call for this change (Bass, 2020; Bass, 2022). And, indeed, this kind of reform aligns with the values that drive many citizens of the academy to use educational experiences as a means for effecting positive change in the world.

The future vision Bass proposes is inspiring, but radical reform implies upheavals to change structures and systems, perhaps even revolutions. This can be perilous to navigate, as embedded norms and structures are often difficult to transform. Existing ways of operating and the power hierarchies created by them, both within and outside the academy, are difficult to disrupt. But just because something is difficult does not mean it is not worth doing. Pedagogical innovations, or going beyond the learning paradigm, can drive and sustain positive societal impacts as well. The freedom to experiment in an academic setting and to consider information and data in a contextually rich environment can support the type of activism that leads to broad societal changes. Situating learning in places is one way to support and encourage grassroots change. Any one change may seem small, but through time, effort, and iterative growth, places—and even society—may be transformed. Soft reform conceived in this way can create radical change by empowering people to become agents of change.

Developing educational approaches that encourage students to critically evaluate and question foundational assumptions of a society, with the goal of creating more insight, wisdom, and compassion for others, is a high-impact practice. We use the word wisdom to combine ideas of intellectual insight, empathic understanding, and judicious problem solving, with the intention of echoing Bass (2022) who used the words and phrases "holistic," "equitable," "harmonic," "compassionate," "hope for society," and "serve society and planet as future Three Horizons thinking" as

outcomes we should strive for in university education.[2] The innovative, new approaches to education Bass calls for, such as, but not exclusively, place-based learning, may develop deeper wisdom within students, perhaps allowing them to become better change agents, focused on improving the places where people live and work, and perhaps contributing to better solutions to the world's wicked problems (Bass, 2020).

Bass's vision for a university community is "Beyond the Learning Paradigm," and four factors in his vision particularly resonated with our approach to place-based learning. These are to support transformative education, develop change agents, build partnerships with community for impact, and recognize faculty and students as partners and co-designers. We had a more mixed reaction to the fifth factor Bass presented—to help redistribute power and privilege. Redistribution suggests that the amount of power and privilege available is limited, and redistribution is the only way to correct the balance. In business and economics, we use an analogy to challenge the fundamental assumption that informs this approach. Redistribution implies "dividing the pie," where the pie is fixed in the amount of power and privilege available, and justice requires redistribution from one set of people to another. This limiting belief may lead to competitive battles for limited resources. An alternative approach challenges stakeholders to "grow the pie," where together we create more power and privilege among a greater pool of people who then have access. Our vision of the pie is that an increase in resources, access, and value for everyone allows people to increase their share and thus shift power and privilege proportionally without deliberately taking away from others. The implication is less emphasis on competitiveness and more on cooperation, with a focus on dismantling barriers to access a place at the community table. We believe this assumption empowers more people to become change agents. Which assumption is more "true" or more appropriate? This is a question for the university to explore, in the spirit of Bass's call for radical reform in education.

Place-based learning may be a transitional innovation that survives into the future of moving "beyond the learning paradigm." We find two features particularly relevant for our students. First is place-based learning as a means of contextualizing both learning and learners. In our experience, this can lead to personal transformation and identity formation for the students. Reflections by the students both during the courses and after graduation indicate greater personal growth and a personal vision for their role in their communities that was broader then just being a consumer and having a job. The place-based learning experiences in our courses emphasized identification of opportunities for improvement and creating recommendations (not all place-based learning does this), and this emphasis created a sense of agency many students did not have before, as they described in their reflection essays. The process of our courses helped students understand and

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[2] Bass mentions the work of Bill Sharpe, International Futures in his keynote. We were not able to find a published source that corresponded directly to the words Bass chose here, but, like Bass, we want to acknowledge the source or inspiration of these ideas. For anyone interested in more detail, we recommend Sharpe et al. (2016) or Sharpe's other published work.

challenge assumptions about how a specific community works, including the relationships and structures embedded within and around it, and gain insights into how improvements (change) can be made. That process also helped students lean into being agents of change for a specific neighbourhood, both in their course deliverables and after graduating. This approach to learning within and about context can upend traditional notions of oppression and victimhood, and challenge the systemic structures that hold people in unhealthy places, in the spirit of Bass's vision for the third horizon in education. In the context of our courses in a university-wide entrepreneurship program, we frame systemic analysis as the necessary, deep problem analysis needed before defining opportunities for change. By situating this learning in communities as places where people are together and can work together, students can transcend the limiting assumptions embedded in traditional learning contexts and develop agency and freedom to understand, motivate, and activate ways to make change within themselves and within communities.

Place-based learning links students to the specific relationships and people and places of their communities. As they learn in this model, our students not only become partners and co-designers with us as faculty, but they also influence community partnerships. The impact of this connection between places and learning echoes learning traditions that emphasize the connection between knowledge and caring. Can our educational paradigms create communities full of change agents? Can we become communities that generate the grassroots changes that challenge the powers and privileges of rigid social structures and systems, creating a new world of hope for people and the planet? This is what we hope for in students/learners who are empowered to learn in places.

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