

The Place Based Intensive: An effective tool for a quality distance education

Adam Kane, Rural Development MA Student
RD 492 Development Leadership Seminar
Spring 2013

The University of Alaska Fairbanks relies heavily on correspondence mail, audio, video and multimedia online technologies for delivering a quality distance education to all Alaskans. Another frequently used method at the University, one that does not rely on technology and yet is a very effective means of educating students from across the state, is the Place Based Intensive (PBI). Many Place Based Intensives follow the place based education model similar to the experiential learning model. This method differs significantly from traditional classroom based and distance delivered education. It can also be used as a means to involve communities in the educational experience by allowing students to participate in local problem solving while learning about the history, economy, environment, culture and traditions of a place (Place-based education, 2013). Place Based Intensives have also been found to enhance a student's educational experiences, academic performance, improve pre-intensive student cohort relationships and allow students and instructors to share an educational experience that can be beneficial to all parties involved (Kane, Notes from RD 492 - Leadership Seminar - History and Cultural Identity on the Kenai Peninsula, 2013). This paper will take an in depth look at the reasons for holding a Place Based Intensive as well as operational components that should be considered when organizing a Place Based Intensive.

Reasons for an Experiential Learning Place Based Course

Background

Place based and experiential learning, where knowledge and tradition are incorporated in regards to a specific place, are educational methods that have been used for thousands of years (Bursky, 2007). Youth would learn from elders by watching and participating, in this way

traditions and knowledge were passed down through generations. Historical references to experiential learning include Aristotle's statement, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them" (Aristotle, 2003). It is now a couple thousand years later and this statement still stands true.

For many centuries educators took their students out on field trips to actually see places and experience them firsthand, allowing them to touch something or to learn something that couldn't be taught or learned in the classroom. In the 1970's several American educators in California began to discuss various ways to make education more relevant for their students. Through this process they found that learning was improved with experience based methods. Those educators eventually formed the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) which now has over 1,550 members from 33 countries (Our History, 2013). Their organization includes members who work with students in a number of fields including education, recreation, outdoor and adventure programming, the environment, mental health, youth development, service learning, organizational development and more.

There are now dozens more organizations like the AEE that facilitate place based and experiential learning, they are associated with associations, institutes, universities, and community trusts and more.

Methods and Objectives

Experiential learning has been the focus of many studies and is at the center of many educational programs around the world. Though they are not exactly the same, experiential learning does share similar philosophies with action learning, cooperative learning, service

learning and place-based learning, as well as others. One often used theory of experiential learning is based on David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (ELM) which is a circular system including four stages: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualism, and Active Experimentation (Mobbs., 2013).

There are a number of learning objectives associated with experiential learning that are incorporated in a Placed Based Intensive. The preferred method generally depends on the instructor and the specific course. The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) College of Rural and Community Development (CRCD), for example, offers a few intensive courses every semester. Some of these courses rely solely on the Place Based Intensive for the transfer of knowledge while others rely on distance delivery methods for the majority of the class and then include a place based lab component (generally science core CRCD science classes are held this way). This component is held as a PBI and has specific goals and objectives which the student must meet and prove competency in. In the UAF CRCD Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development a few Place Based Intensives are held each school year. Some PBI's are required to earn the Rural Development B.A. and M.A. degrees. These intensives tend to focus on specific topics, organizations, locations, cultures or traditions of a place. Examples of this include *RD 492 – Leadership Seminar – History and Cultural Identity on the Kenai Peninsula*, *RD 492 – Leadership Seminar – Alaska Legislature*, and *RD 600 – Circumpolar Indigenous Leadership Symposium*.

The methods of a PBI are fairly straightforward, depending on the subject of the intensive, they can be based on physical travel, interview, hands on learning, traditional storytelling and

historical research. For science based lab intensives there are specific methods prescribed for each lab component.

Organizing a Place Based Intensive

Pre-travel

The pre-travel portion of a PBI is extremely time consuming and can be difficult for those responsible for coordinating the intensive. Many different aspects of the intensive must be pre-planned, some things to consider for PBI pre-travel include:

- Completing required paperwork (student travel agreements, travel request forms, insurance, etc.)
- Agenda
- Presenters
- Lodging
- Food
- Transportation
- Students
- Funding
- Partnerships
- Field trips
- Admission to restricted locations (parks, museums, galleries, aquariums, etc.)
- Food (snacks, meals, students with allergies)
- Supplies and materials (pen & paper, computers, projector, speakers, etc.)

Agenda

A lot of thought and time is needed to create the agenda for a Place Based Intensive. The framework it provides is important so that both students and presenters know what to prepare for, what experiences they might have, where they are supposed to be at any given time and it can be used as a good reference in post intensive reflections.

Closely following a well written agenda will also help the course run smoothly which is a benefit to the faculty and staff who are responsible for coordinating the intensive.

Presentations

Presentations at an intensive are intended to provoke thought, transfer knowledge and show personalities in ways that have more meaning in that specific place. While many of the presentations could be broadcast to students distantly, currently-used distance technologies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks do not readily allow open interaction between the presenter, instructor and the students. With a respectful group of students in a meaningful place, a live in-person presentation can be very comfortable for a presenter which could lead to them sharing personal and historical experiences as well as interesting information about the place.

Presentations at a PBI can vary dramatically depending on the subject of the course and even throughout the same course. It can be beneficial for presenters to offer opposing or contrasting views from each other and from the students, allowing students to learn about a subject from a number of perspectives and form their own opinions.

Presenters are typically unpaid, however, certain people can be awarded an honorarium from the University at the Instructors discretion. Travel and lodging costs for some presenter may also be covered by the University.

Field Trips

Field trips enable a student to physically be in a location that is important and can give meaning to the overall intensive. Trips can include stops at modern, historical and pre-historical sites,

scenic locations and locations of political, environmental or economic interest. Because the field trip can be somewhat difficult to plan, the following factors should be taken into consideration:

- Ease of access (parking, ramps for disabled, difficult terrain, etc.)
- Variety of student enrolled
- Weather
- Transportation to and parking at site
- Availability of restrooms and food
- Possible requirements (dress code, entrance ticket, release form, etc.)
- Possible restrictions (including photos, video, audio recordings, speaking, etc.)
- Emotional ties to students (should be considered for historical sites)

Lodging

Housing a large group of students can pose a challenge, especially in rural Alaska where the traveling students, instructors, presenters and coordinators could easily fill up all the available accommodations in a small village. It is significantly easier to house and feed students in larger communities, although in cities transportation can be an issue.

It is likely to be very expensive to house students and so often they will often have to room with each other, or pay a portion of the costs. It is important to remember that some students are less comfortable with lower quality housing than others, and complaints could arise if a student finds the housing inadequate. Availability of internet has also become a factor to consider when arranging accommodations. Many students need the internet to complete assignments and communicate with others. The availability of internet in the hotel room is

more unlikely in smaller communities. Proximity of the hotel to restaurants and grocery stores should be considered, because they will be used and appreciated by students.

Students should have an opportunity to participate or provide input in the planning of accommodations as well because of the possibility of potential issues that could arise (i.e. pre-travel inter-student relation issues).

Food

Feeding a large group of students can be costly and difficult. In Alaska this is even more so, because of the greatly increased costs of food in rural areas. It will often save the University's and funding partner's money if the coordinator purchases snack foods in Anchorage or Fairbanks ahead of time. It is also important to consider food allergies and other dietary concerns of a varied group of students. Having a large supply of healthy snacks and drinks on hand can help a conference run more smoothly because students, presenters and instructors will pay attention and not rush through their work because of hunger. It is also helpful to let students know what to prepare for in regards to eating choices, some students might not as easily be able to afford to eat at restaurants 3 meals a day and thus need space, time, and access to a kitchen to prepare their own meals. Offering students an estimated cost of eating at local restaurants while on the intensive could help them better prepare for the trip. Specifically in Alaska, some urban students might not be familiar with the prices in rural locations and could arrive at the intensive financially unprepared.

Transportation

Transportation can include many methods such as on-foot, buses, cars, boats, planes, etc. They must all be able to accommodate students/faculty/presenters who could have disabilities. It is possible that students could be prone to travel sickness, or have a fright of certain forms of travel (some students could be afraid to fly or of water). Other factors to consider when planning transportation include space for luggage, rest stops, drivers, insurance, etc.

Different types of vehicles can be better or worse for a Place Based Intensive depending on the specific situation. For example, a 15 passenger van could be better in a city than a bus, however, multiple vans might be needed to transport all of the students. Having multiple vehicles could lead also to issues with drivers getting lost or separated which could result in all of the students to be late for a scheduled event.

Students

Students who enroll in Place Based Intensives are extremely varied, from their backgrounds to prior educational and life experiences. Sometimes it is helpful for Instructors and classmates to attempt to learn about each other before the class, however it seems that true relationships do not begin until the class actually meets at the intensive. Trip coordinators should also ask students ahead of time if they have disabilities or issues with any of the methods of transportation planned for the trip. Prior knowledge and planning could save the University and the student time and money.

Special personalities and characteristics will be discovered amongst students at the intensive, these can be good and bad for the cohort experience, though unfortunately, they cannot easily be planned for.

A Place Based Intensive should be designed with the teacher's objectives and student's learning goals in mind. It is advantageous to inform the students with as much detail as possible ahead of time to give them the opportunity to physically and emotionally prepare for the course.

The outcomes of a well-planned intensive can be great, some students have voiced beliefs that intensives are the most enjoyed classes of a program and that they tend to learn better during an experiential intensive (Kane, Notes from RD 492 - Leadership Seminar - History and Cultural Identity on the Kenai Peninsula, 2013).

Faculty and Staff

In some respects, the instructor of record at an intensive plays a smaller role, especially pre-trip, than the coordinator, presenters and the students. Much of the work of the faculty member includes holding pre-travel classes, arrangements for partnerships and presentations as well as giving direction and facilitating reflections during the intensive. They are also ultimately responsible for ensuring that the goals and objectives of the course are met, through tests and assignments, and that knowledge is successfully transferred to the student.

Staff often plays a larger pre-intensive role as a coordinator planning travel, food, supplies and accommodation as well as distributing and processing much of the necessary pre-trip

paperwork (travel, insurance, registration, etc.). During the intensive the coordinator plays a vital role resolving logistical issues and ensuring that the trip goes according to plan.

Facilities

Having an appropriately sized and well situated meeting room can help the students to be more comfortable which is conducive to a quality learning experience and helps the course go smoothly. A meeting room also allows students to have a somewhat traditional classroom feeling despite the fact that they are likely not in a classroom, this can help students who are not as accustomed to experiential learning situations.

Acoustics can be an issue when considering which room to use for an intensive. A room that has too many echoes or is too large can cause students and presenters who have trouble hearing to miss out on important information and discussion.

Partnerships

Partnerships can be very important to the success of a Place Based Intensive. They grant students the opportunity to learn about a specific organization or program from the point of view of the partner. A partner could also have access to presenters and locations that the University might not otherwise have. It is important for the partner to remember that students could have varied pre-intensive opinions about them, which could affect the overall experience of that student. While positive views of their organization could be common, partners must also be open to the possibility of students criticizing them justly or not.

Besides the special educational perspectives that can be brought by a partnership, partners can also help offset the enormous costs of a PBI which will be discussed in the following section.

It is important for the University to consider the potential for issues to arise when deciding to form a partnership with an outside organization. Despite the good intentions of the University, there are organizations who attempt to use large amounts of money to influence opinions. One example of this is the Pebble Partnership who has donated money to many organizations including the Girl Scouts, whose local Dillingham chapter immediately rejected the money, but not before Pebble sent out press releases to statewide media explaining how they were supporting Dillingham youth and appreciated in the community, both of which were untrue and unappreciated.

Cost

One of the largest disadvantages of holding a Place Based Intensive is the cost. According to the director of the Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development, Miranda Wright, a typical intensive can cost between \$35,000 and \$40,000 (Wright, 2013). This is a significant amount of money for almost any department at any school and most likely costs more than any other method of classroom or distance delivery available. Some of the greatest costs stem from the travel and lodging of students, staff, presenters and faculty during the intensive.

Unfortunately, there is little that can be done about these costs considering the fact that students from across the state who have taken the appropriate prerequisites are eligible to enroll and the University is generally obliged to accept a certain number of eligible student.

One method the University can and has used to help offset these costs is to form a partnership with an organization that is willing and able to contribute financially. In the case of the Rural Development course *RD 492 – Leadership Seminar – History and Cultural Identity on the Kenai Peninsula* UAF partnered with the United States National Parks Service. A partnership like this was mutually beneficial because the NPS was able to share their stories and points of view through employees, presenters and field trips to NPS sites. The benefit to the Parks Service is that students will likely have positive opinions of their interactions and share their experience with others. The benefit to the University is that the costs of holding a highly regarded Place Based Intensive are considerably reduced. With classes that are so thoroughly enjoyed by students and faculty, the University is also better able to retain students, which is necessary for the University to exist. Students can also benefit from partnerships because without them, these types of classes might not be offered as often or with the same amount of quality resources available. Because many Rural Development students are non-traditional, working during the day and taking classes distantly in the evening, Place Based Intensives are also enjoyed because it gets students out of their normal routines for a short time and allows them to really focus on their education in an interesting location.

Assignments

The amount and difficulty of assignments vary depending on the subject of the course. UAF Rural Development Place Based Intensive courses generally require students to complete one major assignment, a research type paper. These papers are not expected to be completed during the intensive, however they are supposed to include experiences and ideas generated

from the intensive. Additional assignment at RD PBI's can include Questions of the Day, required Journals, and active participation during the intensive.

Assignments for science based courses with lab intensives are designed to test a student's ability to prove that they have met the goals and objectives predetermined by the university and the faculty. These assignments are expected to be completed during the intensive. A science based class will usually have many other assignments, quizzes and tests throughout the semester.

Alternatives

Unfortunately, currently there aren't any equivalent alternatives to the Place Based Intensive as a tool for Distance Education. Eventually with technology however, a student might be able to have a reasonably similar experience from a distance. This might be possible through an online, multimedia experience which could include live streaming video of presenters, presentations, video documentaries, pictures, music, etc. Aside from lack of high bandwidth internet connectivity across much of rural Alaska, one of the biggest limitations of the online forum as a method for an intensive is the inability to facilitate open discussion, which is a major asset to a successful intensive. Another drawback to using online resources for intensives is that it is physically more straining for a student to sit in front of a computer screen for the same amount of time they would be able to sit in a meeting room or go out on a field trip during an intensive. Students would probably not make the same beneficial cohort relationships online or over the phone that they do in person.

Conclusions

After recently completing *RD 492 – Leadership Seminar – History and Cultural Identity on the Kenai Peninsula* I wanted to use my positive experience to explore the use of Place Based Intensives as a tool for distance education. In my opinion, these classes make a large impact on the lives of those students, instructors and sometimes even presenters who participate. Fortunately, the impact is usually positive and valued, which encourages students to continue their studies and to pay attention to concepts or actions that take place in the state with which they may have been previously unaware or unfamiliar.

The largest drawback, as mentioned earlier in this paper, is the substantial costs associated with an intensive. There really aren't any good ways to diminish these costs aside from creating a partnership with an outside organization. While I believe in the case of the Kenai Peninsula Intensive the partnership between UAF and NPS was successful, I do worry that certain polarizing organizations could attempt to garner positive attention for themselves in the future by promoting rural education.

Overall Place Based Intensives are seem to be very beneficial to all parties involved and should be used more in the future at UAF.

The following are some reflections RD 492 students and faculty shared with the class a week after the intensive (Kane, Notes from RD 492 - Final Class, Reflections, 2013):

“I wouldn't change anything, it was a great experience...”

“The tribal issue presentations were interesting and helpful in understanding the region.”

“This class was life changing and I am grateful for the chance to go on the trip...”

“I want to read other students papers to see everyone else’s perspectives on the trip.”

“This class helped me visualize and learn about the region in a meaningful way...”

“It was spiritually important and something I will never forget...”

“People have to go on a trip like this...”

“I want to share pictures and contact information to stay in touch with all of the other students...”

“I really enjoyed the seminar and the discussions...”

“This was a really rewarding experience...”

Works Cited

Our History. (2013, April 22). Retrieved April 22, 2013, from Association for Experiential Education:

<http://www.aee.org/about/historyOfAEE>

Place-based education. (2013, April 19). Retrieved April 22, 2013, from Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Place-based_education

Aristotle. (2003, January 1). *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from Google Books:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=dZDShfzVHEcC&lpg>

Bursky. (2007, April 26). *Place-Based Education Reviewed: An Academic Reflection*. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from University of Vermont:

http://www.uvm.edu/rsenr/ep/EPdocs/Acad_Reflect_LitRev/Bursky_AcadReflectDraft.pdf

Kane, A. (2013, April 25). Notes from RD 492 - Final Class, Reflections. Alaska.

Kane, A. (2013, April 14-20). Notes from RD 492 - Leadership Seminar - History and Cultural Identity on the Kenai Peninsula. Alaska, USA.

Mobbs., D. R. (2013, April 22). *David Kolb*. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from University of Leicester:
<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/resources/teaching/theories/kolb>

Wright, M. (2013, April 15). Director, UAF Department of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development.
(A. Kane, Interviewer)