

To Learn is to Belong: Experiential Learning and Indigenous Connection to Place

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop recommendations for experiential learning (EL) and understanding the Indigenous worldview of connection to place. This study focused on a sense of place as being fundamental to both Indigenous epistemologies and experiential learning (EL). Despite their distinct cultural foundations, both perspectives assert that learning arises from active, relational interactions with the land. Unobtrusive research methods were utilized. Illustrative examples of unobtrusive research techniques employed in this study included the examination of historical documents, the assessment of literature available in the public domain, the analysis of physical location, and the exploration of lived experience. This article posits that meaningful EL should not treat place merely as a passive backdrop, but rather as a dynamic entity that actively influences identity, belonging, and comprehension. It serves as a reminder that, as members of the human community, we share an intrinsic interconnectedness.

Keywords: Experiential learning (EL), Indigenous connection to place, Indigenous education, cyclical learning, land-based pedagogy, Canadian military history education.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

A sense of place is central to both Indigenous worldviews and experiential learning (EL). While rooted in distinct traditions, both emphasize that learning emerges through lived, relational engagement with land. This article argues that meaningful EL must recognize place not as a passive setting, but as a dynamic presence that shapes identity, belonging, and understanding. By bringing together Indigenous relationships to land with Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world (Dasein), this article explores how presence in place can shape learning, support historical understanding, and foster reflective and relational engagement.

1.2 Foundations of Experiential Learning

EL is relational and embodied. It is grounded in the idea that meaningful learning occurs through direct engagement with the world (Dewey, 1963; Kolb, 1984; Beard, 2023). Learners draw insight from lived experience through active participation, critical reflection, and situated understanding. Learning is shaped by both the content and the context, as well as by the relationships formed during the process.

The foundations of EL can be traced to John Dewey's *Theory of Experience and Learning*. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1963) presents learning as a continuous and dynamic process shaped by interaction between the learner and their environment. While Dewey does not explicitly theorize place, his emphasis on the importance of continuity, experience, and environment creates space to consider how physical and relational settings shape understanding. Learning, in this view, extends beyond formal classrooms and involves emotional, physical, social, and intellectual dimensions.

David Kolb (1984) expanded Dewey's ideas in his *Experiential Learning Theory* (ELT). Kolb's theory presents a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This model illustrates how learners build knowledge through experience and reflection. Understanding develops through repeated engagement with ideas and actions across different contexts. Although Kolb emphasizes process and adaptability, his framework remains rooted in psychological traditions and does not fully account for how place contributes to meaning-making, identity, or interpretation.

More recent EL models have expanded their foundations to better reflect the complexity of lived experience. Beard's (2023) *Holistic Experiential Learning Model* (HELM) outlines seven interconnected modes of experiencing: doing, sensing, feeling, thinking, belonging (both social and more-than-human), and being. HELM emphasizes that learning becomes deeper and more meaningful when individuals engage their full selves through body, heart, mind, and environment in the learning process (Beard, 2023, p. 64). The model affirms the importance of relationality, embodiment, and the dynamic interplay between inner and outer worlds. While HELM remains grounded in educational design, it also introduces emotional, ecological, and existential dimensions that enrich how we understand experience (Beard, 2023). Across all of these frameworks, place continues to emerge as a powerful influence on learning, yet the meaning of place itself often remains under-theorized.

Despite their contributions, most EL theories tend to emphasize behaviour, cognition, or emotion. These frameworks often overlook the interpretive and existential dimensions of learning. Questions about how learners make sense of experience, how place carries meaning, or how learning shapes identity remain underdeveloped. In particular, there is little exploration of how place becomes meaningful beyond action, observation, or reflection. A deeper philosophical account is needed to explain how presence in place contributes to understanding.

While Heidegger did not write about education directly, his concept of *Dasein* offers valuable insight into how individuals come to understand themselves through their presence in the world. Heidegger (1996) defines *Dasein* as “an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather, it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it” (p. 32). This means that human beings reflect on their own existence and seek to understand their place in the world. People make sense of who they are through relationships with space, time, and others. In this view, place is more than a physical setting. It is a lived space that holds meaning through presence and interaction. Learning happens through lived experience and becomes meaningful when individuals are fully present and aware of their surroundings. This awareness involves emotional, sensory, and intellectual engagement with the world. Heidegger’s perspective adds depth to EL by focusing on how learners exist in relation to place. It shows that learning is shaped by presence, interpretation, and engagement with the world around them.

EL and Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* connect in important ways with Indigenous understandings of land and learning. Although the philosophical foundations differ, both recognize that place holds relational and embodied significance.

2. Literature Review

As previously mentioned, this study employed unobtrusive research methods. This literature reviews play a vital role in the research for several reasons, primarily serving to establish the foundation and context for this new investigation. The review entails an examination of existing scholarly articles, and other pertinent sources. This review situates this new research within the broader academic discourse, illustrating its unique contributions to the field. The works produced by Indigenous scholars play a vital role in advancing our comprehension of varied cultures, histories, and current issues. They serve as a significant medium for representation and in the processes of decolonization. Furthermore, these texts confront traditional and often restricted academic worldviews, providing genuine perspectives that have frequently been marginalized within mainstream historical and educational discourses.

2.1 Indigenous Connection to Place

Indigenous connection to place is a spiritually significant relationship that also encompasses cultural (and practical) elements that has evolved since time immemorial on Turtle Island (North America). This understanding is deeply connected to the land, the gifts the Creator placed in Aki/Ahki (the land) and kinship with the environment in Indigenous philosophy known as “All Our Relations” - which is fundamentally interconnected with Indigenous identity, well-being and cultural maintenance (Abotossaway & Pitt, 2024; Pitt, 2025).

For the Original People of North America's traditional territories and homelands, the land is not merely a natural resource to be consumed but a spirit, moving beyond the western-lean ideology that the land is a physical space to a living entity. Some locations have greater spiritual significance than others, e.g. burial grounds, sites for ceremonies, pictographs, etc. Likewise, connection to place is nuanced and can be expressed through oral histories, stories, art that interlink cultural values and a sense of belonging (Grieves, 2009; Pitt, 2022).

The land has provided for the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island for tens of thousands of years prior to the advent of Europeans. The relationship with this land provides a sense of belonging and social-emotional wellness (Fatima et al, 2022; Pitt, 2020).

Indigenous connection to place and wellness are specific to each community. Likewise, speaking Indigenous language is interconnected with wellbeing and communities possess their own dialects of languages, in years past when more language speakers were alive, you could identify which community and part of a community based on dialect. Today we are seeing more communities strengthening connection to place and reclaiming Indigenous ways previously lost to colonialism. Connection to place also promotes connection to culture and Indigenous philosophies such as “All My Relations” as rekindling our relationships with non-human beings (e.g. as family includes animals, rocks, the trees/plants). Likewise, Indigenous kinship with the environment and stewardship of the land is paramount to wellness as reflected in these Indigenous traditional territories and homelands. Colonialism and its lasting/ongoing impacts have not only eroded identity and wellbeing for Indigenous populations, but contributed to socio-economic (i.e., Indian Act of 1876-Present) and health/life expectancy (i.e., StatsCan) disparities. Indigenous communities and identity's place in the healing journey plays a profound role in counter-acting colonialism on Turtle Island (Maracle, 2021).

These broad and aggressive forms of assimilation represent part of the deliberate efforts to sever Indigenous ties and connection to place, for instance, religious conversion efforts have significantly changed how Indigenous peoples view traditional spaces (Barker and Pickerill, 2012). In contemporary society, many settler Canadians still perceive treaties as a form of land surrender, however, this was not the promises made in post-European contact treaty making as Indigenous peoples did not “give up” the land, rather it was an agreement to share in the land and its bounty, while stewardship was to be Indigenous-lead rather than what became a Canadian provincial responsibility (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Lands and Forests, etc.) under the BNA Act of 1867. In order for Indigenous culture to survive in the mainstream, Indigenous land and place-based learning is essential (Brauer, 2017).

2.2 The Plants and Trees (Flora)

The land, the trees, the rocks are often forgotten in the fast-life we live in today, as previously noted, the western-leaning lens views them as “natural resources” which stems from the colonial worldview. For example, the land as something people have dominion over (e.g. the Dominion of Canada, still the legal name). Likewise, colonialism, industry have all reshaped the Spiritual landscape that existed here before the arrival of Europeans, i.e., Trout Lake Dreamer's Rock and the Montreal smelting and reduction refinery that was at Trout Mills in

North Bay (ruins are still visible) that refined the ore taken out of Cobalt, ON, and brought via railway from 1907-1909. Note, rail construction started in 1903 at a rapid pace, reaching New Liskeard, ON, by 1905 (Cobalt's silver rush pinnacle). By 1906 the rail extended to Englehart, ON, and was completed to Cochrane, ON, in 1909. Extensions brought it in the 1920's-1930's to Moosonee, ON, by 1932. (Dr. Pitt notes: "I have ridden this railway "milk run" numerous times as a young man, my settler great-grandfather worked for the railway for fifty years when he returned home after fighting in WWI"). The colonial mentality can be seen in the nomenclatures used, e.g. worldview of the land in naming, for instance, the Office of the Surveyor General (Upper Canada) from 1792-1827, then became known as The Crown Lands Department, 1827-1905, followed The Department of Lands and Forests, 1906-1920 and then known as the Department of Lands, Mines and Forests, 1906-1920 and in more recent memory, it was referred to as the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR as colloquially termed by many today) from 1920-1972.

Colonialism's expansion and desire for lands and resources (timber/mining) lead to a number of Treaties such as Robinson Superior and Robinson Huron in 1850 which governments are perhaps beginning to understand better more recently as treaty partners. The rights of the land were parts of Indigenous treaties (e.g. Dish With One Spoon Wampum/Treaty) before Europeans but left out of Crown-Indigenous treaties. The remnants of logging in the area 1890-1906 can still be seen today in some places, such as the Jocko Rivers area northeast of North Bay, ON, which Dr. Pitt states "I have found three large lumber camps lost to time/history, there were supposedly five in total in those times." A number of Zhingwaak (pine) were cut down in those days. Timber was big business, as was reflected in the number of Fire Towers erected, e.g., Temagami, ON, and less accessible ones such as the Tower Lake Tower off McConnell Lake Road of Highway 63. Later programs such as the Ontario Natural Resources Junior Rangers at McConnell Lake and Samuel de Champlain Provincial Park next door the Canadian Ecology Centre (CEC) near Mattawa, ON, was an environmental youth program for about seventy years cancelled in 2012.

The Indigenous worldview differs as a major philosophical difference is that of "*All My Relations*" or "*All Our Relations*" which does not view ourselves as having dominion or control over the land, but rather living in kinship with the environment, stewardship and reciprocity. Our view of family, as mentioned, includes the rocks, the trees, plants and animals, who are our first teachers. We practice the honourable harvest and did for thousands of years before first contact, by taking only what we need and never taking the first plant we might see, as it might have been the last. Our Ancestors and Elders teach us about Mino Bimaadiziwin, which is a philosophical understanding rooted in Anishinabek (and other First Peoples) worldview meaning the "good life" or "good way or path" – in some translations to English.

One pathway to Mino Bimaadiziwin are the Sacred Seven Grandfather Teachings, often see these teachings appropriated in schooling and assigned to the Gregorian Calendar months (September-June) instead of the 13 moons. Similarly, they use an Indigenous framework with English meanings of the words while each is disconnected, which is not an Indigenous way, all things are interconnected as we see when out on the land/Aki. There are any Medicine Circle teachings (keep in mind variance based on geographic location, e.g. some use blue), i.e.

East/Yellow - Spring/Early life, South/Red – Summer/Youth, West/Black – adulthood, White/North – old age. Think of the Medicine Circle is more 3D rather than 2D and holistic, multiple doors of knowledge, which lead to more doors beyond of understanding. A holistic view of the Creator's gifts to us/self, Yellow – Spiritual, Red – emotional, Black – physical, White – mental. The importance of balance with all of these versus mainstream schooling which focuses on the mental or neck up education on our bodies. Dr. Pitt outlines “I strive to share what I know with humility and respect for those who shared teachings with me, none of us know everything, but we all hold drops of knowledge that when put together collectively adds up.”

The Ecology and the Land. The Seven Grandfather Teachings are in some understandings (keeping in mind differences e.g. geographically from First Nation to First Nation) interconnected with the Seven Gifts as teachings from our Ancestors. When we often think of trees our minds have been well-colonized to view them as natural resources, rather than living things. In Indigenous oral history and philosophy the Sacred Seven Grandfather teachings have been maintained since time immemorial. Dr. Pitt highlights “There are many teachings and understandings of the Seven Grandfathers and not all Indigenous groups share these teachings, I can only share the Anishinabek understandings passed down to me that I know of.”

Many people are familiar with the Medicine Circle/Wheel as aligned with Seven Animals (i.e. Sabe with Honesty), Wisdom with Amik/Beaver. The Seven Sacred Grandfather Teachings help us to live Mino Bimaadiziwin. These principles are often align with animals, these teachings do not mean the same thing as the westernized dictionary definition of these terms in Modern English. The trees communicate, share nitrogen, bloom, more nuts and fruits more squirrels, more hawks and eagles, all things are interconnected in the canopy. In the forest the trees and plants, who along with the animals were our first teachers, connecting these traditional teachings with the ecology of the canopy. For example, Love, Humility, Truth, Honesty, Respect, Courage/Bravery, and Wisdom.

At the ground we learn about Love, this is where the vines interlink with the Mitig (tree) teaching us about the importance of love. Humility we find in those foods that sustain us in the ground that we do not seem such as potatoes, finding these brings us to our knees and the learning of humility. Debwewin or Truth are learned next in those first teachers, the plants, for to understand Debwewin is what some Knowledge Carriers say is the most important. The plants and medicines teach us that some are good for us (e.g. Morels for cooking, some mushrooms) and some are harmful for us (e.g. poison ivy, some mushrooms) but we must know Debwewin the Truth about them, much like people. Raspberries and strawberries, the latter also connects with our hearts and Love as their seeds on the outside as we walk on our Mother on the land. Honesty, is often taught with those plants further above (i.e. some interconnections with the Three Sisters of the Haudenosaunee of corn, squash and beans), as we trust these foods to be good for our survival. Respect follows closely with the other berries, i.e. Blueberries and also Star Teachings. These berries and others frequently grow close together with other berries, such as raspberries and each one is different but they respect each other despite these differences, which is something humans can value in differences and respect our brothers and sisters. Courage or Bravery comes from those Mitig (trees) that can handle the changes and

harsh climactic conditions of the four seasons/directions of the Medicine Circle. These Mitig may at first glance appear fragile, such as the apple tree but they can withstand a great deal. Dr. Pitt goes on to say “Growing up we had a crab apple tree in our yard and it always taught me Bravery which the Mother Mukwa (bear) would show to face her fears when she came into the yard to protect her cubs.” Those Mitig that are older and taller, those trees with branches and limbs outstretched like arms are praying for us as people to the Creator, just as the Seven Grandfather’s were worried about us a long time ago which is where we learn Wisdom in the canopy. These Mitig protect everything below, those hardwoods/maples. Some Elders say, when you look at the nut trees, the walnut is shaped and looks like our human brain and are sustenance for our minds.

2.3 The Animals – Wolves (*Fauna*)

As Indigenous people we are not a monolith, our understandings and ways of knowing vary widely based on geographic location, an important barrier to the assimilative forces of the colonial state which efficiently appropriates and conforms everything (e.g. monolingualism, English/French as the two official languages) of the Dominion of Canada. Dominion comes from the Latin dominus which means master. The original name was to be the Kingdom of Canada, but the British didn’t want to antagonize the Americans. The Indigenous and European-Western colonial worldviews often differ on wolves as in Europe (i.e., fairy tales) as wolves are viewed as a threat to people and livestock. Some Indigenous communities believe that if wolves go extinct, so will people. This is known as a prophecy of the way of the wolf, what happens to them will happen to us.

Wolves and the Indigenous relationship are part of the larger philosophical underpinnings of the First Peoples’ culture and philosophy, as mentioned, for example, *All Our Relations* (i.e. family as plants and animals, not just immediate family and humans, wolf as a brother), the plants and animals as our first teachers, kinship and stewardship with the environment. It is not us as humans that are the problem on the land, but our colonial-western activities. Indigenous people have always been part of the natural ecology of Turtle Island.

In Anishinabek understandings the Ma’iingan (Wolf) means the one sent (or put here) by the all loving spirit to show us the way. (In Anishinaabemowin pronounced My-een-gan). Some oral history (e.g., Creation Stories) from Lake Superior Ojibway tell of the Creator giving the Original Anishinaabe and the wolf who were siblings the task of naming all the plants and animals and once that task was completed to walk separately afterwards.

Wolves often represent perseverance, intelligence and guardianship, as they know their roles in nature better than humanity does now in the fast life. When you watch wolves, the old wolves set the pace, young are protected, with strong wolves guarding attacks from the rear. Wolves have complex pack or group dynamics, e.g., breeding pair will curb numbers based on food availability, and have a strong sense of smell and hearing. The four legged (wolves) also communicate and work together with highly intelligent birds such as the crow (aundek). Wolf is also a clan in Ojibway communities and Nations, where the wolf is sacred and represents protection and guardianship. Wolves remind us about sustainable living and accountability to natural laws mainstream society has discarded. Some understandings of wolves date back in

pictographs, birchbark scrolls and oral histories. A more contemporary example would be the art of Norval Morrisseau who depicted the importance of wolves in Ojibway culture in some of his paintings.

3. Discussion: Intersections of EL and Indigenous Connections in Place

A unique example for examining how EL and Indigenous connection to place intersect in the Robinson-Huron Treaty Area of 1850 is the mysterious and now abandoned Diver Airfield located Northeast of North Bay, Ontario, Canada.

April of 2024 marked the 100th centennial anniversary of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) as a military element in Canada. Did you ever wonder where or how some of these forgotten airstrips in the wilderness came about? They have no plaques or markers indicating their origins, yet somehow, they call out to us, asking questions such as who made them, what was their purpose, when were they made and why? The “where” being in what some folks might term as the “middle of nowhere” – yet these airfields are still whispering to us from the past, to a time long forgotten by many. For some people, a quick Google search usually solves a contemporary question, however, in this case of the mystery surrounding abandoned airstrips in Northern Ontario, Google is not a solution.

When one thinks of the municipality of North Bay, Ontario and area, it has only been around for a very short period of time by all measures. Founded in 1882 (with about 100 people) when the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) arrived, North Bay grew to a town by the early 1890’s (1,726 people) and by 1925 (12,159 people) was Ontario’s newest city. The North Bay arch “Gateway of the North” was erected in 1925 as well. Keeping things in the context of the times, these are the same eras Taylor Sheridan’s famous 1883 and 1923 Yellowstone TV series are set in. North Bay has a very rich Cold War military history and one that is shrouded in mystery. From the secrecy of the underground complex at Trout Lake to the cloak of concealment that brought the 28 BOMARK missiles into North Bay (1961-1972) under the cover of darkness after the cancellation of the Avro Arrow program in 1959 by Diefenbaker, to the CF-100 memorial and BOMARK Missile Heritage site plaque on display in North Bay and the F-101 Voodoo fighter on display at CFB North Bay. Likewise, the nearby WWII POW/internment camps were also in Algonquin Park, i.e., one on Nipissing River and Camp 10 on the South River.

Dr. Pitt has a close connection with the land on which one of these mysterious abandoned airfields is located. Along with his family, he has travelled the forests and lakes in the McConnell Lake Road area for nearly fifty years. While venturing in this area he has seen airplane wreckage and come across soldiers from the military on survival training exercises (whom he says thought they would not encounter other people). Dr. Pitt is Indigenous and has a strong connection with the land in the vicinity of where one of these abandoned airfields is located. Dr. Pitt’s grandfathers were veterans of WWI/WWII and his great-grandfather also worked for the railroad for fifty years after returning from the battlefields of WWI. “The conversations I had with these men draw me to understanding the time and place in which they lived” notes Dr. Pitt.

The railroad and these mysterious airfields are interconnected both literally and figuratively speaking. The Trans-Canada Airline Planes (Trans-Canada Airway System) flew north along the railway line (name changed to ONR in 1946 from Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway) to Cochrane. There are now railway ghost towns are also in the vicinity, e.g., Jocko, Osborne, Tomiko. During the depression era there were a number of “make work” or Unemployment Relief Work projects established by the government to get people back to work, the airstrip projects alone employed hundreds of men. The forgotten airfield made during the depression north of North Bay was at Diver near the end of McConnell Lake Road northeast of North Bay. This airfield also included a “spur line” that ran from the main track east to the Diver Airfield and is still visible today. Airfields were constructed during the depression, some south of North Bay at places like South River, Emsdale, Gravenhurst in Ontario and some north close to Matheson and Iroquois Falls, ON. Gravenhurst was used later during WWII for training for Norway’s Air Force and the RCAF. Diver was also used by the RCAF during WWII, keep in mind present-day Jack Garland airport in North Bay did not begin construction until 1951. During the 1950’s Diver airfield was used and surrounding lakes as a target gunnery range for the CF-100 (the only Canadian-designed fighter to achieve production status, aka the “Clunk”) on display as a memorial in North Bay, Ontario. In the late 1950’s Diver Airfield was transferred to the MNR (Ministry of Natural Resources). There has always been some speculation that the Diver Airstrip was more than just a training ground used by the RCAF during WWII and for training the CF-100’s during the Cold War, due to the added railway line and close proximity to the North Bay airport for this DND project (Steer, 2025).

Some old-timers said they used to see “strange things” late at night in the skies near the Diver airfield says Dr. Pitt. Although the RCAF abandoned the Diver airfield, the flickers of the past can still be found on the backroads. To visit the Diver Airfield, head north on Highway 63 towards Quebec until you come to McConnell Lake Road (just before Eldee) and turn left onto McConnell Lake Road. Drive to the end “T” in the road just past Blue Lake Campground. Turn left at the “T” (right takes you to Maclaren’s Bay) and continue towards Boland Lake, you will see the road into the airfield there.

This black and white National Air Photo Library in Ottawa, was taken roughly during the years the Diver airstrip was active. A photo of one of Dr. Pitt's grandfather's old maps and two Google Maps shots from present-day at Diver Airfield below.



Photo Source: National Air Photo Library (Ottawa)

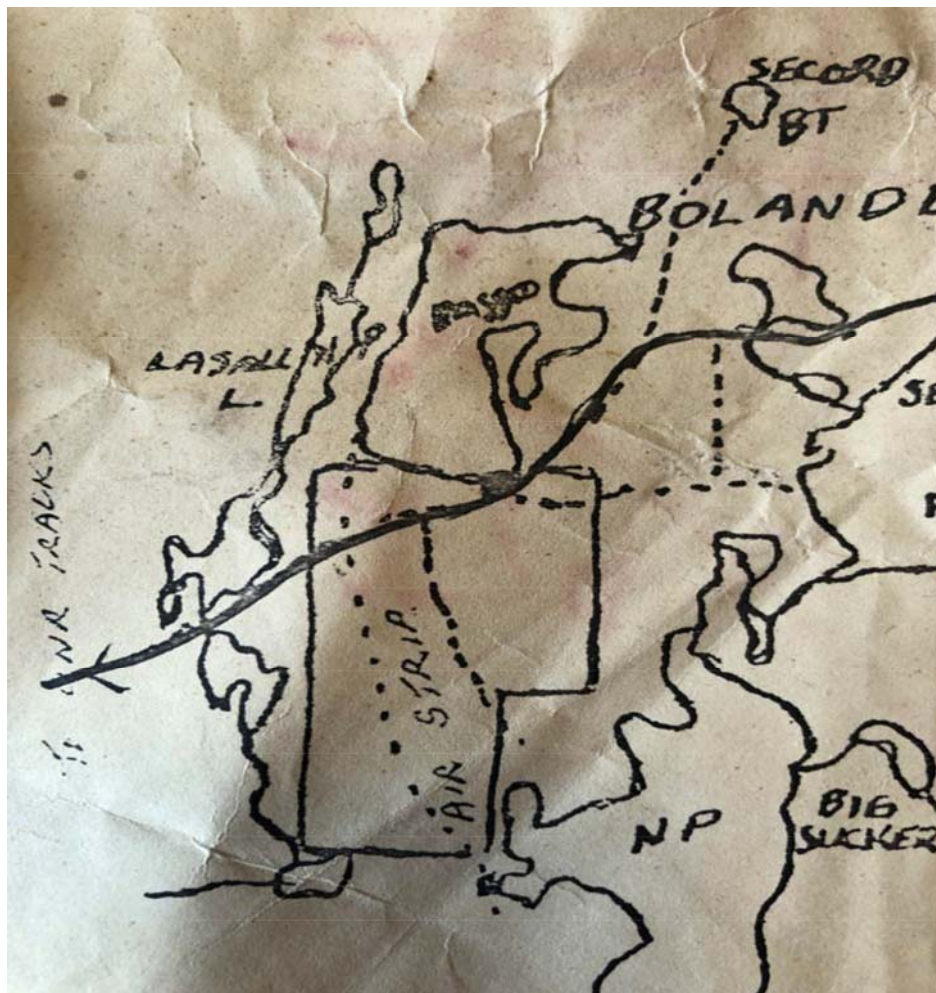
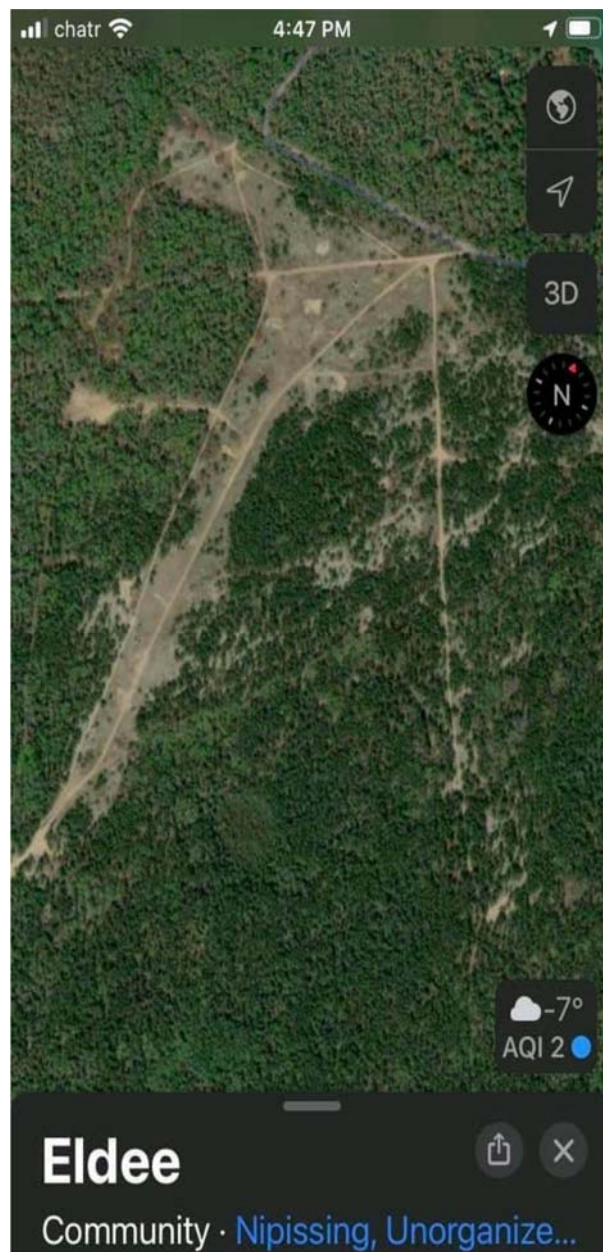


Photo Source: Personal Map (J. Pitt)





Source: Apple Maps app

Dr. Pitt's relationship to the airfield and the rail track is shaped not only through *Dasein* but also through what Heidegger (1996) describes as *Mitsein*, the condition of Being-with others. This concept emphasizes the relational nature of human existence, where understanding arises through our connections with others across time. In Dr. Pitt's case, his connection to the land is deeply informed by his Being-with his Ancestors, whose stories and continued presence shape the memory and meaning he draws from place. These relationships are not fixed in the past; rather, they remain dynamic, unfolding through his ongoing engagement with the landscape. This sustained connection reflects Heidegger's (1996) notion of *temporality*, which situates existence within a historical continuum. The past, in this view, does not recede—it remains active in the present, shaping experience through reflection and interaction. Dr. Pitt's Being is

therefore grounded in a living relationship with family, Ancestors, the land, and the enduring material and emotional traces of wartime presence. Within this relational and temporal framework, he also engages in a hermeneutic process: beginning with lived experience, interpreting it to create meaning, and returning to that experience with renewed understanding. His learning evolves through a continuous, reflective cycle shaped by memory, presence, and place.

Building on this relational and temporal understanding, Dr. Pitt's experiences at the Diver Airfield reflect key principles of EL. As he moves through the landscape and engages with it through his senses, he develops knowledge rooted in place and relationship. This process aligns with Dewey's (1963) view that learning emerges through meaningful interaction with the environment, where experience serves as the foundation for reflection and understanding. Kolb's (1984) ELT is also evident here. Each time he returns to the airfield, he engages in a concrete experience, reflects on it, and incorporates those new insights into his understanding of land and history. This, in turn, demonstrates how repeated engagement fosters ongoing learning. Beard's (2023) holistic model further highlights how cognitive, sensory, emotional, and relational dimensions contribute to this process. For Dr. Pitt, presence on the land activates memory and emotion, shaped not only by his own experiences but also by inherited stories and Ancestral ties. These moments reflect an Indigenous understanding of land as living and relational. The airfield is not a passive backdrop but a participant in the learning process. Dr. Pitt's learning emerges through full engagement with his surroundings. His experience shows how experiential learning, when informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, can support deep, situated understanding through presence, reflection, and connection to place. Two photos from present-day at Diver Airfield below.



Photo: Diver airfield today (J. Pitt)



Photo: Diver airfield today (J. Pitt)

Dr. Pitt's experience at Diver Airfield demonstrates how the intersection of EL and Indigenous connection to place can deepen our understanding of history. This approach moves beyond viewing land as a static backdrop and instead highlights how it shapes knowledge and understanding through memory, presence and reflection. The airfield becomes a site where learning is embodied and relational and informed by experience. When EL and Indigenous worldviews are brought together, they support learning that is rooted in place, shaped by personal connection, and guided by a sense of responsibility to the land and its histories. This intersection shows how place shapes learning through experience, connection, and responsibility.

4. Conclusion

In many Indigenous cultures, Dr. Pitt reminds us that "all things are interconnected" the same is true with EL and Indigenous understandings, for example across cultures globally, fire (shkode in Anishinaabemowin) is used for different purposes. Western research by Clark, Landgraf, and Lynn (2024) entitled "The influence of domestic fire on blood pressure and heart rate" pointing out that watching the campfire drops our blood pressure with the right sight and sound, and gets better the longer we sit and learn. In the meditative state our brains benefit from what is known as the frequency following response, fire flickers at 10-12 Hz alpha rate (Clark et al., 2024), reminding us that as human beings we are all connected. Flowing from the unobtrusive investigation a series of recommendations follows.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

5.1 Educators

Educators Integrate EL:

Design learning experiences that are situated in and responsive to specific places. Encourage students to engage with the land through observation, movement, and reflection. Like Dr. Pitt's story demonstrates, knowledge becomes meaningful when grounded in lived relationships with place.

(i) Support cyclical learning processes:

Foster opportunities for repeated engagement with place over time. Encourage students to revisit sites, reflect on their experiences, and build on previous insights. This approach aligns with Kolb's ELT and supports ongoing knowledge and understanding.

- Include Indigenous perspectives through relationship:

Invite Indigenous community members, Knowledge Keepers, or Elders to co-create learning experiences where appropriate. Emphasize Indigenous ways of knowing, such as *All Our Relations*, as frameworks for learning that are relational, embodied, and place-based.

1. Integrate Land Acknowledgment into practice, not just procedure:

Move beyond perfunctory land acknowledgments to sustained engagement with the local landscape and its histories. Invite students to explore the meaning and responsibilities of being in relation to that land, drawing on both Indigenous and experiential frameworks.

2. Foster intergenerational learning:

Where possible, incorporate oral histories, family narratives, or community voices into classroom learning. Dr. Pitt's story illustrates how memory and experience across generations can enrich historical understanding and deepen student engagement.

5.2 Curriculum Developers

- Embed land-based learning as a pedagogical approach:

Move beyond treating land as a setting and integrate it as a dynamic source of knowledge. The curriculum should reflect how learning can emerge through physical presence, memory, and relationships, drawing from both Indigenous worldviews and EL theories.

- Balance content and context:

Ensure that curriculum frameworks support learning that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally grounded. EL often engages affective, sensory, and relational dimensions that need to be acknowledged as valid ways of knowing rather than "value added" to traditional education.

- Develop assessment practices aligned with EL:

Include reflective and narrative assessments that value learning over time. Encourage documentation of personal insights, community engagement, and growth in relational

understanding—not just mastery of content.

5.3 Educational Institutions

- Support long-term engagement with local places: Create structures (e.g., field visits, community partnerships, local walking curricula) that allow students to return to sites throughout their academic programs. Learning deepens when students have time to build sustained relationships with place.
- Recognize place as a pedagogical partner:
Frame place not simply as context but as an active participant in learning. Institutions should support educators in designing programs where land shapes inquiry, identity, and reflection.
- Align with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action:
Demonstrate institutional commitment by responding to the 2015 TRC Calls to Action related to education and land. This includes supporting land-based learning, centering Indigenous ways of knowing, and creating space for Indigenous leadership in shaping curricula. Institutions must recognize that reconciliation involves not only inclusion but also structural change, rooted in respect, relationality, and a responsibility to the land.
- Create space for relational and reflective pedagogy:
Support teaching approaches that prioritize slow learning, storytelling, and relationship-building. Institutions can encourage this by adjusting schedules, supporting interdisciplinary and community-based teaching, and valuing reflection as both scholarly and pedagogical practice.

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