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# What Came First, the Love or the Learning?

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## What Came First, the Love or the Learning?

*Samantha Hale, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*Today I'll be talking about identity and a sense of home. Before I start, let me briefly tell you a bit about myself. I am ¼ Irish, ¼ Italian, ¼ German and ¼ English. I don't know where my Irish, German or English relatives originated, but my Italian side of the family comes from Bergamo, Italy; I still have family there to this day. I was born in Weymouth Massachusetts, a suburb just south of Boston. I was raised and educated in Weymouth until high school, when I opted to go to a private school a few towns over. At that point I moved to Cohasset, MA to live with my dad. I currently live in Bellingham Washington. That is the place where I pay my taxes, have my truck registered and receive mail. The place that goes deepest inside of me and where I try to spend the most time is split between the ocean and the alpine reaches of mountains. For me, home is anywhere that I have good friends and family, where I feel a part of the culture and where ocean meets mountain.*

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**Keywords: sense of place, environmental education, home**

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### **Now, with a show of hands, who here has ancestry that originated in Pacific Northwest?**

If you were to meet me on the streets of Boston and ask me where I was from, I would probably say Cohasset. But, like many Bostonians do, if you had said 'no, no, where are you FROM, what are you?' I would say, oh, I'm Irish and Italian. There, in that place, a mixed bag of nationalities, heritage is how one identifies. It is your culture, your language, your food, maybe, if you are a frequenter of the north end, also your place. My friend Kevin, born and raised in Dublin would say 'Bollox, I'm Irish you American.' Kevin is from Ireland, where people identify by the country they were born in, not where they live or where their parents and grandparents were born.

Here in the United States, we have a more difficult time identifying where we are from and what is home. In the book, 'Travelers' tales: narratives of home and Displacement' writer Mandan Sarup quotes Eva Hoffman. In her bid to answer the question of "Why do so many Americans go to psychiatrists all the time?" Eva says "maybe its because everyone is always on the move and undergoing enormous changes, so they

lose track of who they've been and have to keep tabs on who they're becoming." Sarup sums it up quite well, saying that identity is not to do with being, but with becoming.

Like many who call the Pacific Northwest home, I am a transplant. For the past few months, I've had a hard time answering the question "where are you from?". My general response is "well, originally from Boston, but I live in Bellingham". Will I ever get to the point where I respond 'I am from Bellingham'? There are many reasons that I grapple with this question. Boston is my home; I was born there, I fit in there, and that is where my dad lives. My culture and traditions align with New Englanders.

I drive like a maniac, enjoy calling myself a Masshole, and have a hard time not being sarcastic. I drop the r's when I'm tired and call that thing on the wall out there, where drinking water comes out of a water bubbler. But Boston and Massachusetts does not have the land and environment where I feel at home. It also does not have the culture of crazy mountain people that I have found myself so enamored by. In the end, Boston is no longer my home. I am making a new home in Bellingham and I am loving it.

So what makes up the home? I did some extensive research on this and came up with many answers. Some say a sense of safety, some say community, others say it's the place, and many more people say it's a mix of many of those things. The makeup or definition of a sense of home that most resonates with me comes from an Inuit holistic lifelong learning model. The Inuit believe that people are lifelong learners with almost every aspect of their life acting as teacher. They divide the sources or domains of knowledge into *people*, *culture*, and *place*.

*People* is made up of your family, friends; your community. Maybe it's your religious community, your school community or your hobby community. *Culture* is made up of the language and traditions that you feel a part of. Often it may be the culture that you are born in, but it can also be one that you have found speaks most to who you are. Language can be made up of the actual language spoken or the different phrases or words used. Traditions can range from the small customs you do around the home, to the ways you eat or present yourself to others. *Place* can be the physical place, the town you were born in or the country; but it can also be the environment - the desert, the high mountain plain, the rocky coastline.

In all of the readings that I did, I feel that the Inuit model of lifelong learning speaks most to my idea of sense of place as a domain and source of knowledge. Sense of home informs who we are as people. You would not be the person you are without being taught through the people around you, the culture you were born into, or the place that you live.

There are also three different aspects of place that I want to talk about. *Place attachment*, *place identity* and *place dependence*.

*Place attachment* makes up a huge portion of a sense of home. It is the emotional bond between people and their environments. *Place identity* is the substructure of self-identity that consists of memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings and conceptions of behavior and experience that occur in places that satisfy an individual's biological, psychological, social and cultural needs. Finally, there is *place dependence* – the positive evaluation of a place on the basis that it meets an individual's needs and allows them to achieve their goals. This is like my need for both mountains and ocean, or someone's need to live in a place that has employment for them.

I wanted to talk about the topic of home, because when I moved down to Bellingham in October, I was lost. I was a foreigner, a stranger, a refugee. I felt like I had lost my community, the language and traditions of Bellingham were suddenly extremely foreign to me, and while I had the ocean back, I had lost the immediacy of my high mountain peaks.

My sense of home, something that I slipped so easily into upon moving to the Learning center last fall was gone. I was homesick for Boston, something that I have learned many times over is the first warning sign of impending depression. I quickly started to cave in on myself, finding no interest in things I once enjoyed. At first, I chalked it up to school.

The classes are too hard, my workload too much, being in a classroom again is too straining. Then I thought to myself, it's because I'm in Bellingham. City life is not for me, I need the mountains. Yes the ocean is here, but what is it compared to the vast wilderness and quite that I was used to at the Learning Center.

I spent almost every weekend of my first few months in Bellingham up at the Learning Center. If I stay here, I thought, everything will be ok. I'll be in my place, with my friends and it will all be good. But many of the people I had spent the summer with were gone, in Bellingham or off on grand adventures. Fine – I'll just hike tons, I thought. That didn't work either. The more that I thought about it, the more I came to realize that I had lost my sense of community. I was suddenly alienated from the people I had once spent so much time with.

I went about researching and delving into how to build communities and what a sense of community meant. If I build up my community or make more friends (I thought), I will magically feel at home. I was so busy looking for the 'right' solution, the magic fix that would suddenly cure my homesickness. It wasn't until I started meeting east coasters in Bellingham that I realized what I was missing. Now, my east coast Bellingham friends are amazing, but they weren't the magic fix. I had people in Bellingham and a place that provided easy access to mountains and ocean. But I was missing my culture. Up until that point I had three separate parts that stood alone (*People, Place, Culture*), not three parts that interacted. These three aspects of home are like a triangle, they mean little unless connected.

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**Please raise your hand if you receive mail in the Pacific Northwest.**

A few months ago I watched a Ted Talk entitled 'Where is Home' by Pico Iyer. An Indian by blood, as a child he moved to England and then the United States. He was educated in England, has a house in California, but prefers to spend most of his time in Japan. Pico had recently lost his Californian home due to forest fires. His friend recommended a monastery where he could go to recoup and think.

There, he thought long and hard on the idea of home and what it meant to him. He concluded that home is not just the place where you happen to be born, but also the place where you become yourself.

Identity and a sense of home plays a large part in our wellbeing, in us becoming ourselves. It can throw off our sense of self, mess with our idea of community and affect us so deeply as to throw us into depression. Earlier I mentioned three different aspects of place; place attachment, place identity, and place dependence. Like the different aspects of home, place attachment, identity and dependence are strongest when connected.

In my move down to Bellingham in the fall, I came to realize how important those aspects were to my mental health. It turns out, the impact of place attachment, identity and dependence are well studied.

According to a 2014 study, Charis Anton found that people with higher place attachment (the emotional bond to place) report greater social and political involvement in their communities and communities comprised of highly attached people are more likely to work together to achieve a desired outcome, such as protecting the environment and protecting the social and physical features that characterize their neighborhoods.

Benefits of place attachment to the individual include a better quality of life, better physical and psychological health, more satisfying social relationships, and greater satisfaction with one's physical environment. There are many things that determine place attachment - age, length of time in a place, sex, rural vs. urban living, and involvement in local life.

*Place identity*, (The substructure of self identity) is correlated with involvement in clubs, town meetings, and participation in local volunteer activities - and place attachment as a whole is correlated with having neighborhood ties and participating in property related recreational and local association activities. Through memory, people create place meaning and connect it to the self, to place identity.

*Place Dependence* is how much a place meets an individual's needs. Place dependence tends to precede place identity; a place meets a person's needs so they become dependent on it and chose to stay there. The longer a person stays in a place, the greater the likelihood of the place being incorporated into the identity structure,

especially if that place also provides the individual with feelings of distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

In 2013, I started my journey towards my Masters of Environmental Education. Before this program, I was under the assumption that if I taught someone about the environment, if I taught someone about a place, it would change their lives. Magically (I assumed) they would turn into food waste warriors or would take steps to reduce their consumption of the earth's resources. During the first summer I was taught extensively about this place and through learning, I came to love it all the more. With mountain school, my goal was to encourage love of place through education.

I quickly found that one of my favorite mountain school activities was something I called team challenges. I tried, each day to facilitate a team challenge, an opportunity for students to solve a problem together, to better their skills as a cohesive unit. I facilitated these activities because I thought they were fun. I enjoyed seeing how students worked together as a team to achieve a goal. I quickly found that these team challenges were some of the most meaningful and hard-hitting activities compared with any other lesson I facilitated. After students developed a sense of community, they were more inclined to speak in a kinder manner, pay attention to my lessons and connect the lessons to their own natural communities back home. Both teachers and students highlighted my team challenges as one of their favorite activities of mountain school. Without meaning to, I helped set the students up for greater success.

In the fall, when I moved to Bellingham I went through a process of voluntary self-displacement - I was suddenly and terribly lost; displaced from my home. I couldn't focus on school while my 'world' around me was in disarray. When I lost my self of home, I quickly went into a downward spiral.

I am a privileged middle class Caucasian who can afford to eat healthy, get a good education and live a life that I am passionate about. I don't have to fear losing my house, I live in a safe neighborhood, and most of my friends and family are alive. If I could easily lose my sense of home just from moving away from the Learning Center, a facility that still stands healthy as ever, what does that mean for all of those who are forcibly displaced from their homes due to wars, or natural disasters or any other traumatic incident?

My experience of losing my own sense of home taught me something valuable about how important that aspect of identity is to well being. It got me thinking about the many millions around the world who are constantly grappling with displacement. Whether they are refugees, whether they have moved on their own accord or have simply joined a new school, the effects of displacement can be severe. People who do not develop place attachment to their homes, but instead view their new homes negatively when compared to their prior homes, report higher stress levels and more health problems.

When it comes to displaced youth and education, research indicates that children are generally more at-risk for developing posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSD) than adults. For example, in looking at Hurricane Katrina, approximately 348,000 K-12 student and their families were displaced and moved to school districts throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Displaced children in host schools struggle with reestablishing a routine, adjusting to a different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic environment, forming new friendships and coping with disaster-related anxiety.

Negative behavioral and emotional responses in school settings increase when the extreme event causes considerable damage to the child's home and community and the child is separated from family members. Other behaviors exhibited included prolonged sadness, extreme nervousness, withdrawal, emotional outbursts, and preoccupation with the storm's impacts on their relatives, domiciles, or their former schools, as well as other signs of negative psychosocial impacts.

Such a rapid influx of new students into underprepared school districts caused stress amongst teachers, school staff, and administrators as they felt the pressure of an influx of traumatized students. Students were often recommended counseling support, but unfortunately, counseling staff were overwhelmed by the large number of people needing services. Students also suffered from seeing their peer groups and family structures torn apart.

Over time, there appears to be a developing social context for displaced students to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. In many cases, these symptoms may become more prevalent in the future.

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***Put your hand up if the Pacific Northwest is the place that goes deepest you; the place that you try and spend the most amount of your time.***

Now, you've been listening to me ramble on about home and sense of home and I'm sure you're wondering what this has to do with the NCI Grad program and environmental education at large.

According to the Tbilisi Declaration, the world's first intergovernmental conference on environmental education organized in Tbilisi, Georgia, of USSR in 1977, the basic aim of environmental education is to succeed in making individuals and communities understand the complex nature of the natural and the built environments resulting from the interaction of their biological, physical, social, economic, and cultural aspects, and to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, and practical skills to participate in a responsible and effective way in anticipating and solving environmental problems, and in the management of the quality of the environment.

Here at the North Cascades Institute, our mission is to conserve and restore Northwest environments through education. Like many other environmental education organizations, we try to instill a sense of ownership, a sense of place in the people we serve. Our mission says that we use education to instill this sense of place. We don't say that we will build communities and we don't say that we're solving the world's problems. We do what we do and we do it well. But place is one just aspect in sense of home.

You've heard my story about how damaging losing a sense of home was to me, but what about to someone else. I've got a story about my first week of teaching mountain school. Tyler and I were team teaching with a previous cohortian. There was one student in our group, who we quickly realized would be difficult. Luckily, as there were three of us, I decided to become his buddy. He was a tough nut to crack. He wandered away on purpose, he spoke over people and he ignored basic requests.

Wanting to show what a good educator I was, I tried to come to the root of his behaviors. After multiple conversations he finally let on that he didn't like this place because he would never be allowed to come back. I told him that wasn't true and asked him why he thought that. 'This place is only for school groups or families', he said, 'and I don't have a whole family'. I asked him to elaborate. He said his parents were divorced and his father refused to participate in family activities. He considered his family to be his mother, his sister and his self. In that instant I completely related to that angry little boy. I told him that everyone is welcome all the time, no matter what their family looks like.

My family consists of my father, brother and I, I said and we can come as a family. If just the three of us can come, so can you, your mom and your sister. Your family is whoever you want it to be. In that very moment, without realizing it, I was witnessing a downward spiral because of a fracture in this boy's sense of identity. By assuring him that his family whoever it was made up of, was allowed, I immediately altered his learning process. Suddenly this once sullen angry child was more open to our lesson. He didn't speak out as often and showed more respect.

It seemed like this boy didn't have a sense of home, and because his family was in pieces, he therefore wasn't able to focus on his education. His world was falling down all around him and the last thing he needed was to be told that huckleberries are tasty.

Environmental education, Hands on education, any sort of education can only go so far when someone does not have a sense of home.

So what do we, as educators, as professionals in the field of environmental education, as parents, as friends, as humans; what do we do when someone we know has lost their sense of home?

There are many things. We can show compassion, we can be supportive and patient. We can work to build stronger communities and make sure to include those

often left out. We can encourage positive healthy relationships, even if it's not a relationship we would see our self in. Especially for those who have been violently displaced, we can provide mental health care. In a world where school shootings are commonplace and 13% of children aged 8 to 15 have a diagnosable mental disorders, mental health care is one of the most important things we can do for sense of home.

Now, programs like mountain school are great. It may be hard to quantify the impact, but we as educators see it, even if only sometimes, even if only in those students who have a firm and healthy sense of home.

But environmental education only focuses on one aspect of home - place. Environmental education needs to work in conjunction with community building organizations and mental health or basic needs fulfilling organizations to strengthen the bond between people, culture and place. For without those organizations, even the best educator is going to have a tough time instilling a sense of home.

So what can we do to help the educator in their mission? My goal here today is not to give you a solution, I cannot give you a magic fix because there is no such thing.

But I do have some ideas. Lets get rid of the stigma of a stranger, a foreigner, an immigrant or a displaced person, lets stop thinking of those titles in a negative light. Let's make displacement, involuntary or otherwise an easier transition for all involved. And lets work to unite communities regardless of skin tone, sexual orientation, culture, birth place; any other factor we can think up to divide ourselves, the human race.

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***Please put your hand up if you consider this place, the Pacific Northwest your home.***

You might be wondering why I've been asking you to raise your hands in response to questions. It's not that I forgot your answer, that I didn't read it or that I want to see your response in real time.

At some point, by not raising your hand, you may have indicated that you yourself are a stranger, a foreigner, an immigrant, a displaced person. And that's ok, that's what makes our country stronger, the diversity in our citizenry.

But how does that make you feel, knowing that the blood that runs through your veins, at one point did not fit in?

What if you had just escaped war, what if you were the minority race, what if you were sitting in a new school among people you didn't know and expected to listen to the teacher or perform well on a test? Could you do it, knowing all that was going on in your personal life?

We each feel a sense of place when we think about our homes, the place we feel comfortable with. It is the people, the culture, the environment that lends to that feeling of calm and ease. Maybe you are born into that place, maybe you move to find that place, maybe your displaced from that place.

You're sitting here, among friends and family, in a beautiful building on the shores of Diablo Lake.

Maybe it's your first time here, maybe this is your home.

Either way, I bet you feel a slight sense of attachment to this place, a sense of identity when you think of this place, a sense of dependence on this place.

Why is that? Was it fostered through love or was it fostered learning?

Thank you.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font. The signature is written in black ink on a light blue, diamond-shaped background that is tilted at an angle.