

Developing a rural lens: Perspective on how to learn about and with rural communities

Nicole Vaugeois

Dan McDonald

Department of Recreation and Tourism Management

Malaspina University-College

Nanaimo, B.C.

Email: vaugeois@mala.bc.ca





Session description

- Meeting the learning needs of people in rural areas can be a challenging task for educational institutions. Difficulties may stem from our inability to view things through a rural lens. This session will help participants to understand the perspectives of individuals in rural areas, and those who are attempting to develop a rural lens. The findings of a three week study tour throughout rural BC, AB and NWT will be used to engage discussion on rural realities and share ideas to better reach rural learners.



Discussion plan

- What is a rural lens?
- Why is it important for educational institutions to develop in faculty and learners?
- Malaspina's initiative to develop a rural lens
- Outcomes of the initiative
- Other ways to develop a rural lens?
- Open dialogue



What is a rural lens

- “It is a way of viewing issues through the eyes of Canadians living in rural and remote areas. Federal departments and agencies are increasingly aware of the effects of their policies, programs and services on rural Canada. Consequently, when considering future initiatives, decision makers are making a concerted effort to understand the impact of new policies and programs on rural Canada.”

Source: http://www.rural.gc.ca/lens_e.phtml



Why is a rural lens important for educational institutions?

- ❑ Our current knowledge base is dominated by an urban lens;
- ❑ Many of our learners are from rural areas which may impact their ways of learning;
- ❑ Many of our learners will live and work in rural areas where their urban learning may not fit a rural context;
- ❑ Our delivery mechanisms are often urban centric and add to the rural depopulation problem within Canada
- ❑ Others?



Much to learn about...

- ❑ There is a growing body of literature on rural life within Canada;
- ❑ Federal and provincial initiatives are working to link policy and program offerings to the needs of rural areas;
- ❑ Rural dialogue has occurred and residents are sharing their needs (educational and otherwise)
- ❑ Educators in predominantly rural areas have “lived experience” that could assist urban education providers to become more effective at meeting the needs of rural audiences



Malaspina's initiative to learn about and with rural communities

□ Context

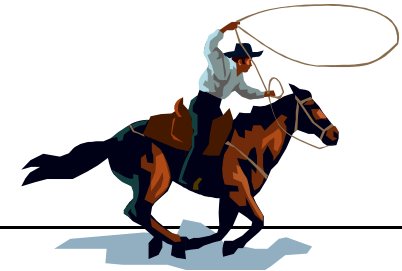
- Malaspina serves a population of approximately 10,000 students
- Part time and remote delivery
- High concentration of First Nations learners
- Majority are regional learners
- Active international education program – take Canadian students overseas



Internationalize or Canadianize?

- ❑ Department of Recreation and Tourism Management conducts international field schools
- ❑ Observation of the need to have students learn more about rural Canada
- ❑ High percentage working in rural areas calling for advice!
- ❑ Observations about the gap between textbook knowledge and rural reality (in recreation and tourism delivery)

First attempt



- ❑ Faculty attempted to host a Rural study tour in 2003 and asked for participants
- ❑ 3 were interested – needed 12 to recover costs
- ❑ Cancelled...
- ❑ Rural is not understood – they interpreted to be “cowboys and farms” and were not that interested...
- ❑ Needed to clarify in better depth
- ❑ Began to discuss in classes

Reality check...



- ❑ 3 week rural study tour
- ❑ May 2005
- ❑ AB and BC
- ❑ Read literature on rural tourism development prior to leaving
- ❑ Students involved in planning
- ❑ Avoided urban areas
- ❑ Read rural newspapers
- ❑ Talk to rural residents

Added depth to learning

- ❑ Second study tour
- ❑ April 2006
- ❑ 7 senior level students (2 urban, 5 rural), 2 faculty
- ❑ 3 weeks
- ❑ Northern remote and rural areas in BC, AB and NWT
- ❑ Built on previous years results
- ❑ Built into a research initiative





Research process

- Competitive application process
 - Why do you want to participate?
 - How does it fit with your career plans?
- Planning together for 7 months (biweekly meetings)
- Directed studies course
- Read literature in advance
- Developed research proposal together
- Students conducted one leg of journey (1 community)

On route

- Set up focus groups and semi structured interviews within communities
- Daily observation journal for each student
- Collected newspapers on route and compared content
- Debriefings on route
- Photo and video logs

Outcomes... some highlights

- “We came to rural areas to learn how we can perhaps help them... but we are finding out that it is the folks in urban areas that are all screwed up”



More learner observations...

- “I don’t know what happened to me during that performance... it was like something just overcame me. I could never have received that powerful of a message in any other way”



Affirmed who I am...

- “I never realized how important my rural heritage has been... and how strongly I want to remain rural. Today I decided I have to live in a rural community again”.



Land of opportunity

- Students became aware of the economic challenges of the north, in particular the acute labour shortages. Each student could have stayed behind with meaningful employment that they were previously unaware existed!



Future study

- One student has decided to return to his rural community to help them develop a model for economic development through tourism. He will study his MA at UNBC in the fall.



Lonely anonymity

- Return to a city, the students noticed immediately that they were now anonymous
- “no one knew who we were and I doubt they cared”
- “patterns of dress changed – we now have to learn about you through appearance vs. contact”



Reverse shock

- ❑ “I don’t want to go back”
- ❑ “I know this is where I do not want to be, for now”
- ❑ “I want to learn more about myself, and rural people”



Faculty perspectives

- Opportunity to deepen learning about classroom content
- Partnership and relationship building
- Ability to see learners engaged
- Hours in the bus together allowed for “in time learning”
- Enabled learning about more than the predetermined “course content”





Other ways to develop a rural lens?

Thank you for your participation!

For more information contact:

Nicole L. Vaugeois at 250-753-3245 Local 2772 or via
email at vaugeois@mala.bc.ca

Dan McDonald at 250-753-3245 Local 2187 or via
email at mcdonlidd@mala.bc.ca