



Preparing Students to Experience Place and Interconnection at Yarra Bend Park

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Abstract

As contemporary education grapples with increasing placelessness, the research advocates for place-responsive pedagogy that reconnects students with local environments before fieldwork experiences. The case study presents a comprehensive framework for pre-excursion preparation, demonstrating how classroom-based activities can enhance students' subsequent encounters with complex urban-natural environments.

Using the example of Melbourne's Yarra Bend Park, on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people, the article explores three primary preparatory strategies: mapwork and spatial contextualisation, narrative-based inquiry using the park's rich Indigenous and colonial histories, and hands-on analysis of physical and ecological samples from the site. These approaches are designed to develop students' understanding of interconnectivity—a foundational geographical concept that places derive meaning from their relationships with other places and processes. The research emphasises the integration of Wurundjeri perspectives through resources such as *Wilam, a Birrarung Story*, whilst acknowledging the complexities of teaching contested histories. It demonstrates approaches designed to foster sophisticated conceptual understanding and interest before students encounter the park's ecosystems and historical remnants. This pedagogical framework addresses practical teaching constraints whilst maintaining academic rigour and cultural sensitivity, providing concrete strategies for transforming abstract geographical concepts into embodied, meaningful learning experiences that prepare students for deeper engagement with place, and enhance subsequent fieldwork encounters.

Background and Introduction

The changing conditions and policies in schools make it crucial that, on *human* and *geographical* levels, teachers reconsider abstract ideas about places and their pedagogical possibilities, mainly with an eye to *in situ* student reflecting and positing. Across all industrialised societies, along with many Indigenous ones, human involvement with places and their interconnectivity has gone through seismic shifts. When it comes to

experiencing what are commonly regarded as *natural* places, the waves of change have been tremendous.

Beyond the fields of academic theory, public media outlets sometimes tap into concerns about technology-driven isolation and declining levels of engagement with natural, communal or spiritual places. It would take a brave geographer to declare that we have reached peak levels of body-quarantine or *placeless*, as opposed to *spaceless*, existence. And although biophilic urbanism might be an inflating science, it faces mounting pressures, and it seems low on batteries when it comes to curriculum content and delivery.

The perceived problem of *placelessness* was classically elucidated in Relph's (1976) prescient phenomenological work, *Place and Placelessness*, which has shadowed trends of virtual, asynchronous, de-subjectified, and standardised curricula. Grounding his critique in a humanist philosophy that essentialises knowledge and meaning as an extension of human experience, Relph described a world in which people are increasingly alienated from the places in which they dwell (the condition of *outsideness*), as they gradually come to lose their authentic sense of belonging or identity-forming rootedness (their *insideness*) in place-based experiences.

Such is easily the life in a world of megacities, global mobility, screen scrolling, hyper-sanitation, avatars—not to mention the shaving away of the natural environment in urban growth corridors, established municipal settings, and wilderness regions. Added to this, modern communities are often composed of members whose “preferred” relationships to the places they inhabit are vastly different, and who routinely move through, or dwell in, a plethora of places.

Despite this global trend away from a kind of place-attachment, or perhaps because of it, Relph's humanist conceptualisation of a placelessness emergency gradually eroded away in the decades of place theorisation that followed. A new wave of poststructuralists characterised phenomenologists like Relph as being captive to the idea of the subject as self-transparent and sovereign, rather than fragmented, contingent, performative or emergent (see Thrift, 1999), and where issues of experiential diversity, political

history and marginalisation, along with the effect of power, are merely optional concerns (see Wylie, 2007). Prior to this, the person-centred ontology of *placeness* and *authentic living* were already sitting uncomfortably with the Marxist argument that processes of capitalism have destroyed spaces only to fetishise and rationally reconstruct them into new realms on unjust economic terms (see Harvey, 1993). Equally questioning of Relph's mission to restore an idealistic sense of placeness and belonging were feminists like Rose (1993) who suggested that phenomenologists tend to be limited by their own male-centric and romanticised Western values. Expanding on these themes, Massey (1996) portrayed the Heideggerian background to Relph's work as a nostalgic humanist regression and distraction from the kind of critical, progressive or inclusive approaches to theorising *place* that give the fruits of social justice the best chance to form and ripen.

The subsequent 21st century creep from postmodernism to socio-materialism and posthumanism did little to redeem Relph's humanist account of placelessness. The phenomenologist's belief in an intentional experience of place as a relatively stable entity was regarded as teleologically irrelevant to the determination and analysis of a place's everchanging ontological totality—a non-representational totality incorporating dynamic uses, affordances, flows, performances, amalgamations and practices, as explained and explored by Thrift (2008), and which could be understood to permeate perceived human or cultural containment. If nothing about a place is essentially or intrinsically fixed, and there is nothing categorically valid that can be experienced by the subject as insideness, then why devote precious educational time and energy to nostalgic or fictional metanarratives, anthropological surveys, illusions of dwelling, or social accounts of particular places? The emerging postphenomenological view of places and their interconnectivities attempted to uncover a layered multiversity of place, or what might be described as an ultra-lamination, where the almost superficial agency of any human is embedded in networks and layers of non-human agency. Hybridisation of a place then becomes key to place-inquiry, and any attempt by geography educators to “inside” the student might be dismissed as a geographical delusion. Expressed in less alarming terms, “post-phenomenology recognizes that much of the phenomenon known as human consciousness does not take place ‘in’ the bodies of the human but ‘with’ the dense scaffolding of things that enables and shapes human thought” (Ash & Simpson, 2014, p. 63).

This sophisticated social-material perspective conspicuously aimed to transcend the accountability of humans to their inherited traditions of responsibility, environmental sentimentality, or naïve customs and discourses of belonging premised on a subject-oriented structure. But there are two issues here. The first is that teachers are mostly democratically compelled to cultivate strong convictions about their duty to support mainstream students on their journey to becoming the kind of veritable *citizen stewards* who find within themselves an irresistible sense of affinity with “natural” places, particularly those of environmental and ecological significance. Secondly, teachers assume that part of their function in democratic systems and secular schools is to support the subjectification of their students, which, in contrast to postmodernism and posthumanism, presupposes the primacy and authenticity of the subject. While this idea of organic subjectification does not necessitate objective educational imposition—at least not beyond the broad aim of building *citizen stewards*—it does give legitimacy to the claim that the subject is an ethical and responsible being who develops, and ultimately responds to the world, beyond the determination of systems or processes of object entanglement. As Biesta (2015) argues, teachers have the responsibility to create learning spaces and events that facilitate the emergence of the student's singularity, which will necessarily involve relationality to the other, ethical encounters, and self-reflection—all of which affirm the autonomy and centrality of the subject, if not necessarily its sovereignty. He clarifies this with,

Subject-ness . . . is not an explanation or explanatory concept, but refers to how individuals exist, from the inside-out, so to speak. It is therefore a first-person perspective—it is the perspective from the individual who acts (or decides not to act). (Biesta, 2020, p. 99)

Put another way, school communities and their classroom territories refuse to let go of the idea that each student is a peculiarly and sensibly stable entity under construction, and that their responsiveness to the perceived world in which they are living and growing with others is of paramount concern.

Here, it may help to share in the curiosity of Kinkaid (2021), who agrees that, for all its interpretive and constructive power, postphenomenology has responded inadequately to the phenomenality of the unified subject and its consciousness. While the interconnection of objects might exist independently and consequentially beyond what the mind can meaningfully know, subjectivity is perhaps

best treated in place-based contexts as both (i) individually originated, and (ii) event-emergent, or inextricably and irreducibly intertwined with the subject's material place conditions. It seems counter to human experience not to premise the student's analysis of assemblages, hybrids, flux and fields on the existence of an experiential subject, or a perceiving self who is in possession of intentionality. When a student studies a selected place, their recognition of interconnections of any kind presupposes their constructivist, tacit or functional knowledge of many *relatively* constant and resonant compositional narratives, elements, evaluations, processes, and other cultural or aesthetic items, based on what has previously been encountered and contemplated. This is the case regardless of whether the student arrives at the educational encounter loaded with a cultural "sense of belonging", whether they are merely equipped with respect for other subjectivities involved in the place, or whether they demonstrate the affective readiness to identify the conflicts, complex hybridity and representations of flux integral to a place.

Teaching units tend to begin with comprehension and terminology. Learning in life, on the other hand, mostly begins with our arrival at situations and places already culturally or materially infused with conundrum, causality, and connection. Without needing to belong to a place, we always happen to be in the middle of somewhere or something when we arrive at it, and when a new piece of learning enters our world or necessitates our puzzlement (Quay, 2013). The traditional constructivist lens positions learning as the growth of conceived connections *as experienced from our subjectivity*. When we restructure or expand our awareness and experience of interconnections, from moment to moment, we are learning in a typically human way, with new experiences incorporating something from former experiences, and shaping the quality of those in our future (Dewey, 1938). Applied to geography learning, this affirmation of lived experience and the hope of building on a constructive appreciation of the environment can be detected in the work of theorists like Seamon (2023) who contemplate a return to humanistic geography.

Arguments about the proper conceptualisation of human geography education—humanist, postmodern, sociomaterial, posthumanist, constructivist, subjectivist, etc.—are unlikely to be settled any time soon. However, the core problem remains that the causal and relational interconnections of local places studied in schools are ever more experientially concealed, socially disembodied, and stripped of their material or actual details—that is, they are too often experienced by humans *out-person* (whether

virtually, abstractly, or immaterially) as opposed to *in-person* (in the conventional sense of the term). Furthermore, there are few ontological grounds for arguing that the place-based human body, with or without intentionality of mind, is entirely immaterial when it comes to designing constructive or worthwhile student investigations of actual places. Places are inhabited and known through the involvement of the human body (see Tilley, 2004). At the level of educational discourse, it follows that there are some widely accepted, if not immovable, place-based principles that might provide the adventurous human geography teacher with hope and surety.

Tautologies are rarely more potent than the observation of Gautreau and Binns (2012) that geographical inquiry needs place; or Bartholomaeus' (2013) claim that geography methodology should naturally choose place over placelessness; or that field-based inquiry is historically the discipline's signature pedagogy (Seow et al., 2019). Somerville (2010) contributes a lucid frame for these principles, advocating for a place-responsive pedagogy which views place as local and embodied narratives set in a contact zone of contestation. As Taylor et al. (2018) subtly remind the many preservice teachers who consult their text, evidence-based findings show that the forces of globalisation have not prevented pedagogical approaches moving towards recapturing ancient ideas of "listening to the land", community-engaged learning, and investment in things local—not that this guarantees that most schools have access to natural places, or that they prepare students adequately for field trips.

Few geography teachers would reject outright Roberts' (2014) claim that there can be no powerful knowledge without experiences of the real world. And yet, teachers are forever frustrated by the obstacles to timetabling a field trip (Griffin, 2011). The usual reasons identified in the research literature can be conveniently summarised into the acronym *BOOT*, standing for: B = beyond cost; O = organisational hurdles; O = off-loading students to a site's experts without adequate curriculum preparation; and T = time constraints. These obstacles to geography excursions make it even more important that field trips are fun and fertile learning experiences.

The purpose of the following case study is to analyse and reveal some of the ways students can be prepared as subjects for place-based learning prior to being afforded the rare opportunity to investigate a local biophilic urban place. It is assumed that well-designed pre-excursion teaching can improve the quality of the student's material, affective, critical, or even spiritual encounter with an urban river and

conservation area, particularly where disciplinary and conceptual frameworks are developed (Gruenewald, 2003). There are many creative and resourceful ways to immerse, sensitise, provoke and involve students relative to a place prior to a geography field trip, all in the laboratory of the classroom.

More specifically, this case study will examine novel and traditional ways, including posthumanist and humanist ways, of preparing students to explain and respond to the interconnections between and within places and their processes in that strangest of fringe territories, the urban-natural environment. As Maude (2016, p. 74) explains: “The significance of these interconnections is that they change the places that are connected. Thus, to explain what a place is like, and especially why it is changing, one must look at its interconnections with other places.”

Conceptualising Interconnection

In broad educational terms, interconnection is central to Michael Young’s (2008) popular account of powerful knowledge because it causally relates network knowledge to personal empowerment and social mobility. Accordingly, a complex awareness of cultural and physical geographical interconnections entails exceptional predictive, explanatory, and practical power. Approaching the same summit from another political spur, Martha Nussbaum argues that the widespread problem of excessive business interests and ethical indifference are only overcome by “the spirit of Humanities”, which includes in its cultural and educative objectives “an understanding of the complexity of the world we live in” (2016, p. 7).

By implication, both Young and Nussbaum challenge the teacher to engage students with the complex geo-interconnectivity of the places they visit and study. One of the appeals of geography education in the context of the school classroom is that the student’s growth is measured and valued in the degree of complexity of not only their normative subject-based specialist analytical knowledge, but also of their recognition of interconnected substantive elements and processes of the world—or the network of geo-cultural and geo-spatial phenomena. The explanation of interconnected *things* equates to potent geographical thinking, whether it happens to be about causal contributory factors, complex terrestrial formations, emerging interdependencies, arrangements of confluence, resource governance and distribution, or material and social place-related assemblages.

In schools, much of what is regarded as sociological, anthropological, and cultural

is taught under the auspices of Geography, which effectively oversees the interconnection of all related phenomena. The study of human connections with land is core to the subject’s purpose, since the notion of connection loosely accounts for most ways in which a place is an abstraction of the interaction of all its constitutive entities and forces. Learning about a place, or places, is foremost a matter of encountering and understanding a site *of* and *for* its diverse forms, fields and layers of interconnectivity.

The components or contents of a place are rarely isolated or static (GWASCSA, 2015; Maude, 2016). They derive their existence, identity and significance from their physical or cultural connection to other dynamic forms and processes. From the beginning of any case study of a place, engagement and learning depends upon student involvement with the singularity or *placeness* as interconnected context—that is, the narratives, drama, contestation, benefits, synergies, and arrangements to which their senses and agency have been introduced. Higher levels of development or living are then demonstrated by the student’s habitation of this complexity. Focusing on a taxonomical account of development, *analytical* and *transferral* stages of learning are premised on a raw encounter with the ontic or subjective interconnections students have comprehended and rehearsed.

So it is that geographical elements best make sense *beyond* their abstract and reductive objectification (Smith, 2007). They need to be encountered in their manifestly situated state, as a part of existing geological processes. As nodes of interconnection, they are born within narratives and systems, as analogic figments in search of an interconnected reality. In the moment of conceptualising them and their connections, something in the human memory and perspective is modified. An inquiry that exposes interconnectivities, either in terms of student prior-knowledge or newly introduced field-related concepts, operates as a gateway to experiential and affective encounters with their site.

As indicated in the synthesis above, this conceptualisation of place has many theoretical roots. It draws from philosophical aquifers that extend well beyond customary representations of Geography in secondary school classrooms and curricula.

Interconnection at Yarra Bend Park

Yarra Bend Park occupies a vast area of mixed-use land immediately to the northeast of Melbourne’s inner suburbs. In recent years, it has served as an archetypal source for investigating, modelling, and teaching geography pedagogy and

curriculum to preservice Humanities teachers. The learning affordances of this sprawling place—a space of and for sophisticated natural, Indigenous, spiritual, colonial, commercial, recreational, civic, residential, and formerly agricultural and industrial interconnections—have proven to be richly manifold.

As its name suggests, the park's many landforms extend from its central riparian feature: a bend in the Yarra River, or the *Birrarung*, as it is increasingly known. Being one of Melbourne's two major watercourses—and much like other major metropolitan rivers around the world—it has an intriguing history of evolving land uses, encompassing all kinds of human practice and ecological resilience. Just as the state of the river influences local living in noteworthy ways, it provides many access points for powerful place-based learning experiences within reach of the city's schools. The site offers the geography teacher the joyful discovery of physical teaching resources while inducing deeper thinking about local environs and their intrinsic interconnectivities. In one sense, the whole of the riverside park is greater than the sum of its interconnections, since the *Victorian Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act 2017*—Woi-wurrung for “keep the Birrarung alive”—now recognises the river as a single living and integrated natural entity requiring holistic and traditional custodianship.

With its many attractions, its confronting problems, and its human-imposed priorities, Yarra Bend Park certainly has the potential to inspire the kind of *insideness of place* mindset postulated by Relph. But while the Birrarung, or “place of mists”, affords a wondrous encounter with nature, placeness and interconnectivity, the primary role of the teacher is usually to structure the student's experience to involve embodiment and criticality (Preston, 2016). And while place-based education has a strong potential to lead to lifelong learning skills and civic engagement (Victor, 2013), it is more likely to occur where effective or expert pedagogy is applied, making the design of preparatory and active fieldwork a specialist matter.

So how might Yarra Bend Park, in all its hybridity, or in all its singularity, be translated by pedagogy and resources into a learning experience of interconnectivity?

Interconnection and mapwork

When preparing students to inhabit places and meet their interconnectivity, maps remain an effective grammatical and pedagogical introduction. They are a remarkable invention not only because they graphically divulge certain

things that are findable within a wider designated place, but also because they expose some of the connections, flows and relationships of those things. Teaching map reading involves teaching the internal interconnection, or *inner-connection*, of the scaled place's features, as well as its interconnection with the world beyond the boundaries of the map. This makes maps useful scaffolding tools, as touchstones or frames for conceptual knowledge rehearsal and transfer.

There is no shortage of available thematic, visitor, or wayfinding maps of Yarra Bend Park. To locate the park within the urban landscape, an aerial photograph of the park is easily obtained online or using GIS, then screenshotted and superimposed on a familiar road map of greater Melbourne. When spatially contextualised this way, the park's significance and scale appears not unlike that of New York's Central Park.

Some simple orientation questions for students about the features of the wider city relative to the photo-form map of the park is another means of accelerating an appreciation of interconnected elements. Instructional or conversational dialogue can be used to guide students in their contemplation of the park's increasing importance to a city whose population continues to diversify and densify. At the very least, an initial map-inquiry can serve to stimulate elaborative rehearsal, encouraging transfer of the elements captured rudimentarily or imaginatively in the map's key.

A thematic map of the park can also form the basis of a student's own narrative composition. Drawing on whole class colloquy and speculation, students can be prompted to embed the features of the park in their own creative or elaborative story. Again, this promotes the engaging rehearsal of speculative knowledge of the park's inner connectivity prior to material or affective encounter. It matters little whether student stories embody personal concerns, or whether they are constructed under the influence of conventional geographical, historical or scientific authorities. The aim at this stage is to foster familiarity with conceptual connections. If Kolb's (1984) experiential cycle is applied, the teacher can later have the students review their hypothetical narratives against any phenomena, processes or concepts that are encountered in texts or on a subsequent field trip.

Interconnection and narratives

For teachers who become well-versed in the commonly available stories of Yarra Bend Park, there are many pedagogical options for stimulating the interest of the students. One engaging method of teaching how the features

of the place coalesce is to dialogically embroil the students in the teacher's own personal tales of unearthing the park's interconnectivity. While storytelling as monologue has the potential to be powerful, it also serves as an effective means for modelling geographical inquiry. One approach is for the teacher to narrate their enjoyment of the enigmas of interconnections and inner-connections of the place, by positioning them as mysteries to be solved, while inviting students to be partners in plot reconstruction and evidential resolution. Having used curious or functional resources to capture setting and perplexity, the teacher deliberately draws the students into the inquiry at mysterious points in the narrative. This supports student development in the art of conjecture, induction, and deduction. It scaffolds the composition of follow-up questions, the interpretation of geographical sources and data, and the courageous transfer of prior knowledge. The outcome of all this is the rendering of those geographical connections necessary to ensure the mystery reaches the stage of denouement.

Yarra Bend Park's history and geography is at the heart of Melbourne's evolution and functioning as a metropolis, so it naturally harbours a tangle of mysteries from which to craft an inquiry narrative. On the far eastern side of the approximately 2km wide park are the unusual ruins of a partly sunken dairy whose moated or "water-jacketed" storage design once served as a pre-mechanical means of climate-responsive refrigeration, keeping milk cool and fresh on hotter days for distribution to an infant city. The purpose of the building is only identified on maps drawn up for infrastructure engineers by the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works in the first decades of the 20th century. The presence of the ruins opens the stories of natural and human processes of shaping places, transition to bounded colonial ownership and farming, the organisation of space for markets and urban expansion—all of which serve to illustrate the complex connection of multiple human and environmental elements and processes, including landforms, meteorological conditions, the planting of hawthorn hedges for sheltering vulnerable cattle, and the compacting of the soil under the "introduced" feet of larger and highly concentrated ruminating beasts—which, incidentally, had the reckless and tragic effect of preventing the growth of the once-prolific Murrnong daisy (*Microseris walteri*), a plant whose nutritious tuber is traditionally a staple food of the Wurundjeri.

Another of the park's signature narrative mysteries is the seasonal visitation of the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*), one of many species of birds (see Source 1) that venture into Melbourne's riverside suburbs. The story of the cockatoo is brimming

with interconnections waiting to be uncovered. Sightings of huge, spread-out flocks of these colloquial "flying bricks" can be pinpointed on a street map scaled to include the suburbs beyond Yarra Bend. Students can then be assisted along lines of induction and deduction to determine that the birds are heading in the direction of the park. All questions about the origins, destination, habits and habitat of the birds can be answered meaningfully through the modelled researching of reliable online sources. The mystery should reveal the park's wood-boring larvae food source, for which the birds migrate with their fledglings in late autumn. After *partying* for several months (those who have observed the antics of the cockies up close will doubtless know what I mean), they abandon the park and head for their hollows in distant forests to raise their next brood. The cockatoo has been adopted as a symbol of local environmental health, as well as an emblem of Indigenous custodianship and presence. Their black and yellow tail feathers fetch a high price, and are sometimes displayed in the hats, regalia and artworks of people of the Kulin nation.

If this mystery narrative is carefully planned to include student-centred inquiry activities, it can facilitate the discovery of other ecological and geographical processes. The phenomenon of Yarra Bend's relatively short-lived wattle trees, which are ultimately torn apart by cockatoo families in their quest for grubs, is particularly novel, and yet wholly illustrative of sustainable and natural processes. Furthermore, the mystery-solver student can be led to stumble upon the history of the concerted and inspiring efforts of citizens to conserve the park. Some of the park's cliffside native vegetation happens to be the city's last remnants of unchanged native bushland. This is partly attributable to the efforts of local conservationists who began weeding and restoring the park's health and safeguarding its habitat features. Action was initiated only after the bend in the river was "moved" in the 1970s and a third of the park was sacrificed for the construction of one of Melbourne's major transport arterials, the Eastern Freeway.

These are but some of the launching places from which a teacher can lead a mystery narrative co-inquiry. There is much to be said for students having a hand in the role of *lighting up* within a narrative a network of connections between the human or material elements and the geological processes constituting the park. When given the opportunity to turn the pages of the mystery, students often experience both the anticipation and resolution of a sleuth. Meanwhile, they unveil instances of geographical change, sustainability, scale, cause and effect, and co-dependence. The resulting episodes of wondrous detail serve to

vivify the students' imaginations of a place and to emphasise its entanglements.

Perhaps the most evocative and engaging of all the available Yarra Bend Park narratives of place and interconnectivity can be found in Wurundjeri elder Aunty Joy Murphy, Andrew Kelly and Lisa Kennedy's children's picture storybook *Wilam, a Birrarung story* (2019). Tracing the journey of the Birrarung from its source in the mountains through the activities of lifeforms, including that of Yanggai (black cockatoo), Boroin (fairy wren), and Kombadick (tree fern), the story illustrates with profound gentleness and sensitivity the complex integration of (i) an older foundational world perspective, and (ii) the ontology of the more recently *arrived* world. At the same time, the story of Wilam is told with little compromise. The interconnection of elements across vastly different cultures emerges as a woven backdrop to the stronger and more flowing interconnectivity that is the living and spiritual entity of the entire river, including the Wurundjeri people and the surrounding landscapes. The story presents as, what Kamileroi woman Elaine Russell (2004) describes in the storybook of her childhood in La Perouse, *the hand of friendship*: somewhere in between the divergent worlds, a hopeful present and shared interest emerge. As a preparatory storyline for visiting the park, *Wilam* has an extraordinary potential to make palpable the interconnected lifeforces that dwell in Birrarung.

There are also reasons for viewing *Wilam* as a political response to the kind of colonial metanarrative Hutchinson (2024) describes as being "reduced to the statement that settlers were unfaltering in their belief in the superiority of western culture." For some readers, the book's illustrations project ghostly and incredible scenes of pre-colonial humanity onto cubic municipal landscapes, and make a strong statement on racism, genocide, and rightful custodianship. However, places like Yarra Bend Park also harbour present neutralities, equalities, and hospitalities, which are just as likely to be identifiable in the quiet, the everyday, the spiritual, and the privately kind or generous. Accordingly, the tone of *Wilam* reminds the reader that adopting an unwaveringly truth-telling stance does not preclude taking a reconciliatory *shared-histories-and-futures* outlook.

If Birrarung is investigated and taught through an Indigenous knowledge lens, then it is possibly best understood "in the context of land, language, and cultural teachings" (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021, p. 4). Community elders are required for teaching on-country ontology, culture and history (Harrison, 2013), and there should be *Culture/Country/People*-inspired partnerships with local Aboriginal communities (Hogarth, 2020; Coff,

2021). The Koorie Heritage Trust of Victoria can be consulted for these purposes. Teachers might also reflect on what might be considered the Indigenous "worldedness" and anti-connectivity view of Mika (2017), which critiques the fondness of academics for breaking things down into the smallest of categories.

The park's authorities have attempted to include Wurundjeri balluk knowledge by way of signage, the Koori garden, and other pedagogical elements. The information board at the Studley Park Boathouse describes how "the region is rich in resources and cultural significance to its Traditional Owners"; awkwardly, however, it positions the text under the heading *Voices of the Past*. Along the river trails are signs relaying the Indigenous colonial experience, and teachers would be well advised to prepare students for surveying these elements and their requisite narratives before visiting the park. The work of Randell-Moon and Ruddell (2024) can be consulted when planning for the inclusion of local communities and knowledge systems in place-based education pertaining to sustainable river management.

Even accepting claims that interconnectivity is essentially Eurocentric, the colonial stories that demonstrate interconnectivity at Yarra Bend need not project notions of Western superiority. Indeed, the more prevalent and publicly promoted park histories of European colonisation, as well as those which surface in less prominent source materials, are full of failure, fixation and folly. The onus is then on the teacher to establish whether their students are equipped with the sensitivities and historiographic positioning to critique the temporal layers of Geography. The design and operation of the park's 19th century asylum is infinitely contentious. So too is the redundancy of the costly flying fox viewing platform, or the impacts of the freeway and the neighbouring golf courses. The tragedies of the Aboriginal police camp, protectorate station and school at the Yarra's junction with Merri Creek raises many geographical issues. Environmental and agricultural fiascos abound. Introduced foxes, which have cost the continent 26 species of native mammals since being released in 1855, keep the park almost free of smaller native mammals and reptiles. In the early years of the Port Phillip colony, market hunters used punt guns to kill upward of 50 native waterfowl with a single blast. Tidal flow, salinity, and flocculation were catastrophically altered all the way upstream to Yarra Bend when the natural lava bridge was blown up.

The geographic concepts underpinning these park narratives should inspire culturally responsive teaching and learning, so that visiting the park

becomes a well-anticipated and meaningful on-the-ground enterprise.

Speculating interconnection using card networking

Situating geographic studies in a local place of the scale and nature of Yarra Bend Park means that curriculum-related abstract and corporeal interconnections tend to be immediately and sensorially discernible. Paradoxically, moving through such a multipurpose, diversely geological, and dynamically organic space sometimes helps students to overcome issues of cognitive load and engagement. There is a growing body of evidence to show that the more experientially real, affective, or place-based the site of transfer, the more natural and impactful the student's theoretical comprehension and cognitive rehearsal (Gutiérrez-Ujaque & Degan, 2023). This explains why experiences of nature are generally regarded as essential for children's health and development (Louv, 2008), or why it is so expedient to practise mindfulness of place (Deringer, 2017), or even why students of Geography might bother to investigate levels of happiness for people who are outdoors or in natural places rather than in built-up urban environments (Maude, 2023; MacKerron & Mourato, 2013).

Assuming that the educative value of fieldtrips and excursions is enhanced where students are prepped or primed to experience a place, and that the interconnections and inner-connections of place can be surfaced through mapwork and narratives of inquiry, the teacher might also turn their attention to other explanatory and interpretive methods of fusing new and prior student knowledge. The hope is that the resultant synthetic understanding will be transferred to actual circumstances encountered later in the park.

There are two Yarra Bend Park classroom activities that fill the preparative zone between a student's initial conceptual encounter and their subsequent experiential analysis. The first of these can be loosely described as *card networking*. Here, elements of the park are represented and encountered in strong *virtual* form. The second activity brings *actual* material elements into the classroom. Both approaches aim to develop in students a degree of expertise that will heighten their cognitive, physical and social in-person encounter of a place, noting that expertise and self-efficacy often drive the design and enjoyment of field trip activities.

Card networking challenges students to work in small groups to generate conceptual network complexity on their own terms. Instructions are given for all personal items to be cleared away, leaving the classroom tables as blank canvases for the arrangement of large-scale graphic organisers. Students are then handed a set of thirty or so cards which they arrange collaboratively in the manner they believe will best capture their shared understanding of the park and its interconnectivity. The cards include photographs of the park's past and present phenomena, with only brief and necessary labelling. Students are given sufficient time to sort through and interpret the cards together before arranging them in their chosen representative format. Once all groups have completed the task, they take turns to explain the compound meaning captured in their interconnected card graphic.

The complexity and diversity of student responses can be astonishing. Although some elements are more overtly geographical in their character than others, the students discover that the ideas depicted in the cards are categorically or causally interconnected in a genuinely place-based sense. The selection of cards can be tailored to the

List of possible elemental cards relevant to Yarra Bend Park	
1. Wurundjeri resources (eel traps, etc.)	20. Wurundjeri cultural, historical, and spiritual sites
2. Land cleared for cattle grazing	21. Ruins of historic flour mill
3. Neighbouring golf-courses	22. Amenities (toilet blocks, wheelchair access, barbeques, etc.)
4. Different forms of water pollution	23. Graffiti on trees and signs
5. Recreational exercise	24. Wildlife
6. Boathouses, now restaurants	25. Relocated Grey flying foxes
7. Protesting and political activity	26. Canoe launching sites
8. Possible canoe-trees	27. Neighbouring housing developments
9. Riverbank damage	28. Aquatic river life
10. State Parliament	29. Former prison
11. Former asylum	30. Community vegetable garden
12. Historic suspension bridge	31. Boathouse and restaurant
13. Viewing platforms	32. Historic fly-fishing pool
14. Dight's Falls	33. Lookouts
15. Gated community/former asylum	34. Neighbouring freeway
16. Hollow trees for nesting and habitat	35. Green wedges and "clear air" city corridors
17. Neighbouring freeway	36. Pollution prevention and removal
18. Visitor safety measures	37. Cycling trails
19. Cleared and uncleared riverbanks	38. State parks authorities

curriculum and the interests or capabilities of the students.

Columns reflecting broad categories are typically quick to emerge, before groups find the creative and conceptual energy to perceive patterns and connections between either the ideas depicted on the individual cards, or the categories established in their columns. Just as popular are chronological arrangements. Where a card reveals no date, students often detect in its illustration clues as to its historical context. Timelines are rarely presented as rudimentary timelines. In most cases, they also capture geographical themes, with the cards being clustered to project a particular perspective of land and change. Depending on the activities implemented before the construction of the graphic, a variety of lenses are predictably adopted, including ethical, sustainability, causal, First Nations, utilitarian, cultural, and industrial. A group's finished graphic often traces the impact of the human activities or natural processes depicted on the cards.

The activity relies on some cards depicting recognisable landforms, objects or physical processes, while other cards allude to abstractions, institutions, and general practices. Whatever the graphic constructed, the teacher can further question or illuminate interconnections—not only geographic discipline-based connections, but also interdisciplinary connections that slide across both the curriculum and the student's world. One possible way for the teacher to lead this geography inquiry is to adopt the *kikan-shido* approach involving between-tables monitoring, guiding, organising, and engaging in social talk (Kriewaldt et al., 2021), noting that there are several ways to structure this approach (Kriewaldt et al., 2024). Just as importantly, the quality of the narrative behind the graphic often improves when groups are allowed to verbalise their efforts or respond to questions.

Interconnection through sample analysis

Another preparatory activity for a Yarra Bend Park field trip involves the teacher obtaining small samples of a range of physical elements found in the park (Source 1). The scale and quantity of the samples required for running the activity are of negligible environmental impact. They can often be recycled or collected with permission and sensitivity. Items, such as a single red gum leaf

or blossom, or a sample of river silt, are stored and numbered in sealed see-through bags, then brought into the classroom for guided analysis. This method gives students in-part embodied access to place, increasing attentional familiarity for the subsequent field trip—cognitively, responsibly, affectively, and expertly, noting that “artefact” and “touch” learning is considered more knowledge-imparting and investigative (Zamarti, 2009).

As well as improving ecological literacy (Orr, 1992), constructive student analysis of the sample item can be enhanced using an online or whiteboard chart onto which student groups record: (i) the nature or name of the item, (ii) whether it is naturally occurring in the park, and (iii) how it might relate to the concept of sustainability. Having applied their pre-existing knowledge, students are assisted in completing the task by consulting a visual catalogue or inventory prepared by the teacher or even by researching online. The teacher then co-constructs a set of notes with the students, employing dialogic techniques and textual resources to capture and explore big ideas, patterns, themes, and new lines of inquiry. A discussion can take place around concepts such as *nature* and what is *natural*. Lenses through which the items might be *valued* or *devalued* can be established. Other emergent topics include the impact of various introduced species, the cultural meaning and utility of Wurundjeri balluk resources, and the forms of pollution or change that have become integrated with a functioning ecosystem. There is also an opportunity to discuss the role of Humanities knowledge in managing the presence and impact of the items, and in responding to wider processes of environmental relevance.

This analysis of the park's items should have direct relevance to subsequent field trip activities. The recording of quantitative data and the use of newly acquired expertise will again be at the forefront of the excursion experience. When adequately prepped, students usually enjoy pointing out otherwise hidden knowledge, even where it is as simple as the possibility that the tree hollow above them might be home to a possum or a parrot, or that pressing one's cheek to the tree and looking up along the surface of the trunk will sometimes reveal strands of possum fur caught on the bark, indicating which creature is more likely to be “at home”. There also is a

List of possible sample items	
1. Yarra River Red Gum leaf/blossom/bark	18. Glass bottles (antique, vintage, modern)
2. Golden Wattle leaf/blossom/bark	19. Aluminium cans and vintage lift rings
3. Black Wattle leaf/blossom/bark	20. Plastic packaging/labels
4. She-oak leaf/blossom/bark	21. Disposable utensils
5. Seeding Grass	22. Organic litter
6. Moss	23. Hawthorn leaves/berries
7. Fungi (decaying red gum)	24. Cotoneaster leaves/berries
8. Periwinkle leaf/flower	25. Snowdrop leaves/flowers/bulbs
9. Tradescantia weed	26. Jonquil leaves/flowers/bulbs
10. Clematis aristata stand (Traveller's Joy)	27. Paper packaging
11. Moreton Bay Fig leaf/fruit	28. Blackberry leaves/berries
12. Pine needles/cone	29. Daisy (native or introduced)
13. Cedar needles/cone	30. Porcelain fragments (antique and modern)
14. Juniper cutting	31. Unused dog litter bag
15. Ivy leaves	32. Rusted wire cuttings
16. Agapanthus leaves/flowers	33. Small bones (possum, bird, sheep "knuckles", etc.)
17. Turkey oak leaf	



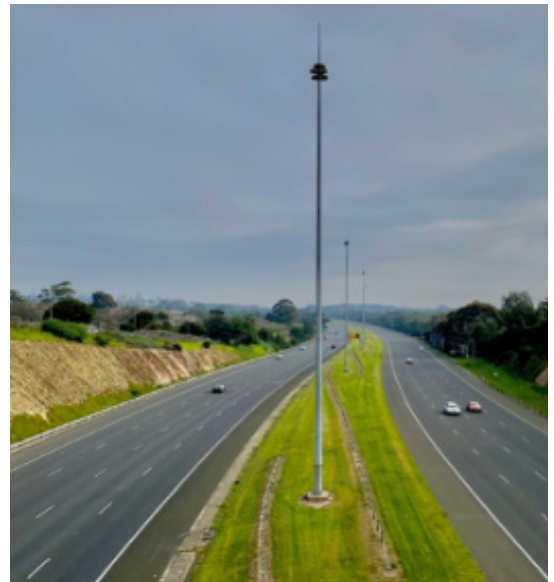
Source 1. Samples of items commonly occurring in the park: (L-R) Red gum leaves and blossom; 19th century porcelain and glass; Hawthorn leaves and berries; Tawny Frogmouth feathers.

golden opportunity to link a pre-excursion sample analysis to post-excursion projects that involve the students proposing or taking civic action.

Other activities for interconnecting virtual sources

Another method of establishing, structuring, and experimenting with new schema is a traditional classroom activity known as *odd-one-out*. Students are presented with three photographs, for example (A) Birrarung viewed from a bridge, (B) the neighboring freeway viewed from an overpass, and (C) cows grazing in a field (Source 2). Student pairs discuss the photographs, generating reasons for deciding which is the odd-one-out. When their findings are compared, students discover that there is no correct answer, since the photographs can be evaluated through different lenses according to different values, systems, or terms of involvement with other things in the world. Cognitive disequilibrium

thereby becomes the avenue to learning new categories or applying new perspectives. In the above example, (A) can present as the odd-one-out because it seems to present Birrarung or the park in its natural or pre-colonial state. However, it shows a river that has long since been cleared of its deadwood, and which was once a veritable tunnel of enormous, inward leaning trees. Some students will determine that (B) is the exception, because the other two present scenes from nature. But is it natural for cows to graze in Australian parks? And is it unnatural for creatures to build structures that contribute to their survival? (C) also presents as the “right” option, either because the photograph of the freeway and the river are compositionally similar in the sense that they have central causeways with vanishing points at their horizon, or because they both depict routes of human travel and connectivity—remembering that the Wurundjeri moved across country by following watercourses.



Source 2. Photographs for odd-one-out activity: (A) Birrarung viewed from a bridge, (B) the neighbouring freeway viewed from an overpass, and (C) cows grazing in a field.

Having to spot and explain the elemental or essential differences and commonalities between images from the park, particularly across time, also prepares students for a real-life encounter. The analysis of before and after photos can be used to highlight possibilities of becoming. Located below the site of the 1870s Kew Asylum is a periodically overgrown Victorian-

era brickwork swale drain (Source 3), running down to the river next to a recently established community garden (Source 4), both of which provide handy before-and-after sources when digging into questions of aesthetics, safety, environmental improvement, degradation, and community relations.



Source 3. Before and after the clearing of the Victorian swale drain below the old Asylum (now a gated community).



Source 4. Community garden.



Source 5. Deep Rock Swimming Pool.



Source 7. Flood warning sign.

Students might also examine *long-before* images and news sources, such as those capturing the purportedly world record high dive of Solomon Islander Australian Alec Wickham in the park in 1918. Under the somewhat questionable management of John Wren, the champion leapt from the top of a tower mounted on a cliff face, diving into the river some 200 feet below. According to newspaper accounts from the time, 50,000 people had gathered at the Deep Rock Swimming Pool (Source 5) to watch the dramatic event. The story channels well into opening an inquiry into Pacific immigration, the origins of freestyle swimming, slavery, and the park's sometimes outlandish history of recreational benefits. The cliffs at the site of the dive were later used for machine gun practice during World War



Source 6. Pollution collected from river after storm.

2, and the pool is still used for swimming today—but only when pollution levels are low enough, which is never the case after stormwater flows (Sources 6 and 7).

Contested, Changing, Cultural

One edifying characteristic of Yarra Bend Park is the diversity of its historical remnants and their narratives. Where Geography and History combine as *place and time*, a natural learning dimension opens in which students contemplate multiple themes and perspectives. The intricacy and scale of Yarra Bend Park provide this dimension, enhancing the prospect of fostering student affection for complexity.

But even if students demonstrate this character of consciousness, how ready are they to embrace the task of performing an indefinite historical or geographical calculus of causal forces? Without the teacher leading the analysis of flux and its complexity, the geography classroom can find itself perched on a cognitive downward slope, where students veer towards reductive ideas, singular overriding explanations, and naïve atemporal truths that reflect only popular assemblages or metanarratives.

The means of teaching geographical interconnectivity in this context, and thereby countering the gradient and its hazards, largely mirror the historical thinking guideposts set out in the work of Seixas and Morton (2013). Change is understood as something comprised of multiple causes, consequences, and agencies. Social, economic, political and cultural conditions all contribute to our understanding of intended and unintended consequences, and the evaluation of their significance and influence. This historical

approach dovetails with Cresswell's (2004) three ways of geographically investigating a place as a location and locale of human attachment, based on Agnew's (1987) notion of sense of place as synonymous with symbolic or emotional meaning—an approach which Freeman and Morgan (2014) have transformed into the highly practical “three lamps” student tool, with a blue lamp denoting the study of bounded and objective aspects of place, a red lamp indicating social constructivist processes, and a green lamp calling for humanist perspectives, with the lamps potentially operating at the same time.

Grasping this series of skills and concepts, or applying any interpretive frameworks, relies heavily on the teacher modelling and fostering inductive thinking. Exemplary case studies of places should readily divulge their uneasy complexities, conflicts and miscellany. To this end, Yarra Bend Park has much to investigate. While park reserves were first set aside in 1877, they have been the site of some epic public quarrels. From 1936 until today, the installations and operations of neighbouring golf courses have not always gone uncontested. Failed attempts by conservationists to block the building of the freeway in 1972 were somewhat offset by the success of the community resistance to the planned construction of the Brunswick–Richmond powerline in the 1980s (Blake, 1988). The translocation of the Royal Botanic Gardens Grey-headed flying fox colony to Yarra Bend Park in 2003 also faced considerable opposition. Geographical issues and connections are deeply embedded in each of these clashes of interest or value, and they are ready to be extracted.

The recent expansion of the park's boathouse and its restaurant makes it an ideal contested site for impressionable students to begin surveying matters of human recreation, liveability, and intercultural exchange, as well as economic and business phenomena of geographical interest. The public amenities and space surrounding the boathouse are a wealth of interconnectivity stemming from material causality and civic responsibility. While an investigation might be framed around the identification and evaluation of what has already been analysed and predicted in the classroom, students might also be led to search for phenomena and interconnectivities that are either immediately deducible and recordable, or a prime target for further research.

Inquiry around the boathouse might centre on the visible sources of river pollution, or the interconnecting processes that explain the presence of bluestone retaining walls and borders around the paths. The colonial origins of the giant English elms outside the boathouse, as well as the modern physical interventions sustaining them,

are deceptively complex sites of interconnection. The students' senses of civic and geographic interest might be triggered by analysing how likely it is that the entire area could again experience an event of the magnitude of the great flood of 1934 which led to the rebuilding of the nearby Kane's suspension bridge.

Those familiar with Melbourne's history will understand the complexity of its colonial calamity. For those who are not, the work of Clark and Haydon (2004) is recommended. When Europeans seized lands and introduced foreign farming practices, traditional Wurundjeri food sources rapidly deteriorated. Traditional means of gathering and distributing resources were hampered, leaving Kulin people with little choice but to rely on the newcomers for their subsistence. Initially, a European supply of food and goods meant that larger Indigenous populations could congregate for longer periods at one place; however, this eventually added pressure on local environs, causing degradation of campsites, coloniser resentment, health implications, and widespread fatalities. Although paternalistic authorities were initially proactive in protecting the Woi-wurrung and Boon-wurrung communities and their way of life, their abject failure to do so resulted in a shift to reactive and assimilatory colonial policies, fierce public debate, and virtual annihilation. In the geography classroom, these threads of historical activity connect with the measuring of wellbeing and quality of life factors like poverty, nutrition, access to safe water, life expectancy, and personal safety—a geographical inquiry recently considered by Maude (2023).

The complicated divergence and intersection of Indigenous and colonial perspectives are indispensable to any Yarra Bend Park case study. They can be made comprehensible by unpacking, scaffolding, and nesting an inquiry in a range of engaging sources and visual encounters.

Wurundjeri custodianship and its suppression at Birrarung can be uncovered in the primary and early secondary source materials of *Liardet's water-colours of early Melbourne* (Bate, 1972). Liardet arrived in Port Phillip around 1840 where he became a ferryman, then a hotelier, and then an amateur-turned-professional painter. His watercolours paint a picture of changing waterscapes. In an almost children's storybook style, the work captures scenes of Melbourne from ten to forty years after John Batman's illegal arrival and deceitful treaty. For students, they can promote deeper affective understanding of liveability, inhabitation, civic values, social variance, and geographical transformation. Simple instructional dialogue and inquiry techniques, such as the popular *see-think-wonder* activity,

can be applied to the details and themes of the paintings.

One of Liardet's watercolours shows three spear-carrying Wurundjeri males, cloaked in animal skins, fleeing a rudimentary stone building whose straw roof is ablaze. At the door stands an armed and panicking European. Dogs appear to be chasing the Wurundjeri. In the foreground are the mammoth logs and stumps of felled trees (Source 8). Students typically hypothesise that the three Indigenous absconders have used arson to retaliate following the invasion and destruction of their country. However, guided collaborative inquiry will reveal that Liardet's painting depicts the cunning escape of Tullamarina (the namesake of Melbourne's major airport) and his peers

from Melbourne's first jailhouse. The men were imprisoned for unwittingly stealing "kangaroo" sheep. Tullamarina was recaptured, taken to Sydney, retried, and acquitted—but he was never heard of again by his people at Birrarung.

Another watercolour shows the original 1838 punt installed for bridging the river at the location of what is now the hectic Punt Road crossing to South Yarra. In the background is a rare early historical representation of a Wurundjeri canoe. The lone male occupant is likely making for the Aboriginal mission station at what was soon to become the site of the botanic gardens—a narrative detail affording affective, empathetic, cultural, and geographic inquiry (Source 8).

Source 8. Liardet's watercolours.



One of the more intriguing of Liardet's watercolours shows a *tanderrum*, a kind of gathering, taking place on an undeveloped Emerald Hill—now the suburb of South Melbourne (Source 8). Student thinking routines and investigative graphic organisers can be applied to this depiction of the event. European onlookers had imagined a war to be unfolding between two “tribes”. In fact, the rowdy battle scenes were the acting out of enmity between the groups, as part of a sophisticated customary legal mechanism. The show culminated in the spearing of the leg of a young man who had been involved in the attempted abduction and fatality of a woman. It is possible that the skilful histrionics and carefully controlled punishment saved the culprit from a fatal act of retribution. These judicial measures can be contrasted with those of the colonisers involving overcrowded prison hulks, gallows, exile, beatings, malnourishment, and years of hard labour. This is an ideal time to introduce students to the last traditional 19th century ngurungaeta or elder of the Wurundjeri-willam clan, the remarkable William Barak, who fought for the justice for his people, and who illustrated and shared Wurundjeri cultural practices, aesthetics and lore. William Buckley's (2002) mid-19th century autobiographical account of living pre-colonially on country with the Wurundjeri for three decades is another source that complexifies the historiography and geography.

Concluding Remarks

Subsequent field trips to Yarra Bend Park will likely provide a potent experience of the interconnectivity of the park's various elements and places. The teacher has many options when designing the actual visit: it might be a storytelling or instructional excursion, a data-collecting field trip, a dialogic inquiry, or a sensory and playful geographical discovery expedition. The basis of the design might be to exploit what Relph (1976) regarded as psychologic and epistemic goldmines of geo-phenomenological inquiry, taking the student *inside* of, or morally connecting them to, the place. It is the student's *inhabitation* of the park, in the strongest sense of the word, that the environment acquires its meaningfulness (see Ingold, 2000). Or if postphenomenology has more appeal, the students can be prepared at school for their *in-person* investigation of the park, and for an embodied and more entangled experience of its hybrid constituents and forces.

Yarra Bend Park might present as recreational space, or a dangerous space, or a beautiful space, or a commercial space, or a vulnerable space, or a contested space, or a sustainable space, or a haunted space, or a laborious space, or an archaeological space, or a dreaming

space—noting that places exist in dynamic relationship with the students' own identifiable and undisclosed subjectivities. As Seamon and Sower (2008) describe Relph's vision, “without a thorough understanding of place as it has human significance, one would find it difficult to describe why a particular place is special and impossible to know how to repair existing places in need of mending.” And without generating an understanding of significance to the human subject, it would certainly be difficult to design the kind of constructivist inquiry unit that is regarded by many teachers as the most transformative learning experience of all: the inquiry in which the student participates by *taking action*.

Whatever the subject's affective experience of a place, it is vital that causalities and related power structures be discovered through their expression as geographical interconnections. This requires students to access a knowledge of how the features of the place connect with each other, with those who encounter them, and with places beyond them, across all conceivable dimensions.

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