**Rural Distance Learning: Going to School Without Going Away**

**(My Musings)**

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If this paper were instead a hit TV drama it might open with a vibrant colourful shot of a bucolic rural landscape with a deep commanding voice-over narration, “The story of any rural community can be told through the lives of two separate but equally important groups,” The visuals would filter into grainy black and white images of economically hard hit rural communities. The narrator continues, “the people who choose to move away and those who decide to stay in their rural communities. What role can distance education play in these stories?” Just as TV viewers’ understandings of truth and fiction can be blurred watching procedural dramas like those in the *Law and Order* franchise, whose signature opening was parodied above, so too are the various social, economic, and environmental facts of rural communities around the world blurred by the idyllic myths of what is rural.

**Musing on What is Rural**

Rurality is subjective. The multiple definitions used around the world vary significantly as they often define rural in terms of isolation, population, an agricultural economy, or the natural environment. The most common definitions describe sparsely populated communities outside a daily commutable distance to an urban area, with a small total population and a landscape dominated by farms, forests, bodies of water, mountains, glaciers, tundra, and/or deserts. These broad facets will be used as an operational definition for rural in this paper. Hard-and-fast measurable thresholds for each facet will not be used as they vary greatly between different jurisdictions. Statistics Canada uses the threshold of less than 1000 inhabitants with a population density of less than 400 inhabitants per square km[[1]](#footnote-1). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development uses less than 150 inhabitants per square kilometer for all countries except Japan and Korea where they use 500 per square kilometer[[2]](#footnote-2). France uses the threshold of 5,000 jobs in a community[[3]](#footnote-3), the United Kingdom, 10,000 inhabitants[[4]](#footnote-4).

Because of these differences there are disconnects between various rural studies around the world. For example, a United States study discussing rural economic issues in terms of the loss of manufacturing jobs in communities, does not meet the Indian criteria of rural being a community in which 75% of the male population is employed in a farming related occupation[[5]](#footnote-5). Imagine two geo-economically similar communities of 2000 inhabitants on opposite sides of the Canada-U.S. border. The American one is rural because it is well below the urban threshold of 2500[[6]](#footnote-6); the Canadian one is not rural, because it is twice the maximum size for a rural community. While acknowledging the challenges of working with research literature studying such diverse communities there is value in attempting to synthesis relevant commonalities.

**Musing on the Rural Research Landscape**

One commonality is around issue of residential mobility of rural residents. Carr and Kefalas (2009b) are often cited for the following categories of young rural residents: stayers, achievers who leave town for college and most do not return, seekers who leave to see the world often through the United States (U.S.) military, and returners who circle back to their hometowns (para. 13). These categories are based on a clear demarcation of either staying or leaving a rural community. Alternatively, Corbett (2007) differentiates more fuzzy geographic distinctions of residential mobility: stay; around here means within 50 km; not far means within 250 km; and away means over 250 km (p. 433). Regardless of the definitions, there is significant research on residents who go away and return to rural locations. This focus continues to assume that young people will leave rural communities. An alternative approach is to look at the young people who stay and ask what role might distance education play in the unfolding stories of rural life for these residents and their communities.

Researchers of U.S. rural policies have found that rural economics are often overlooked as the focus is on the recent economic downturns of American cities rather than the decay of rural economies over several decades (Carr & Kefalas, 2009a, p. xi-xii). Often rural is seen as an unchanging idyllic pastoral setting in which farmers have an undying optimism that next year will be better through a conviction of perseverance and endurance. Carr and Kefalas predict that thousands of U.S. small towns are “twenty, ten or even five years away from extinction because there are too few taxpayers, consumers, and workers to keep going” (p. 2). Besides specific recent global economic changes in agriculture, manufacturing, and world economies, they attribute a significant amount of this to the migration of young people out of the small towns. Like the cyclical nature of farming, many have looked at the migration issue of youth out of rural communities as something that has always happened and always will. Carr and Kefalas endeavor to shed some light on the situation.

**Musing on the Roles of Distance Education**

Many studies on the educational concerns facing rural residents have focused on the individual. Some assess the educational needs of rural residents (Fahy, Steel, & Martin, 2009); others, the complex struggles of rural distance learners (Dalla, R. L., MoulikGupta, P., Lopez, W. E., & Jones, V., 2006.). Dalla et al. found that trying to balance work, school, community, and family, fueled marital strife for each of their rural study participants who had dropped out of their distance education program (p. 401). Walters, White, and Maxim (2004) found that First Nations rural reserve residents who moved away to attend university and stayed away after graduation were significantly more successful in their chosen career paths than those who returned to their rural communities (p. 296). Distance education is not being advocated as a means to keep people in unsustainable communities. Further, distance education is not the best path for every rural resident desiring to attain a higher education. However, distance education does contribute to widening the variety of higher education options available to rural learners and can be an excellent match for the needs of some rural learners (Fahy et al., 2009, p. 16).

The three main concepts researched in this paper are distance education, rurality, and community development. Where published works mention all three, they usually focus their own primary research on investigating two of the facets and state assumptions about the third. For example, where university programs establish initiatives to target rural learners for a particular professional program, their reports often assume that there will be positive long-term economic benefit to the rural communities involved. Without follow up research over several years, long-term outcomes are speculative. Where there is research on education and rural communities, it is often focused on residents who go away and return to rural locations. This research has become the basis for much policy and government efforts to attract professionals to move to rural communities with little long-term success (Rourke, 2008; Sempowski, 2004). Sempowski states that professionals who voluntarily choose to move to and work in rural areas are more likely to stay long term than those who do so as a return of services such as for tuition funding (p. 88). Carr and Kefalas (2009b) are well cited for their research on the brain drain in the U.S. from rural to urban areas, and identify a culmination of small town civic, social, and school pressures on smart teens to go away to university as contributing to the demise of small towns. “Teachers, parents, and other influential adults cherry-pick the young people destined to leave and ignore the ones most likely to stay or return” (p. 19). Civic leaders encourage smart rural students to go away to university, and then lament the rural youth exodus that they helped to create. Like many researchers, my musings are predicated on the speculation that there is inherent value in offering distance education opportunities to rural communities. A measure of that value may be in reversing the brain drain by increasing rural residential enrollment in distance education.

Carr and Kefalas (2009b) speculate that distance learning programs might contribute to reversing the rural brain drain yet their suggestions are limited to training, vocational, and associate degree programs of two years or less (para. 6). It is unclear why Carr and Kefalas did not consider full degree granting distance education institutions for consideration in their recommendations. This view of education is aligned with the behavioral philosophy of adult education. Spurgeon and Moore’s (1997) five philosophies of adult education can be summarized as: behavioral, skills training; liberal, learning for its own sake; progressive, practical problem-solving; humanistic, facilitating individual self-actualization; and radical, making social, cultural, political and economic changes in society (p. 13). A preliminary literature review shows a gap in research pertaining to the community development impact of rural distance learners who attain full degrees while living and studying in their rural communities. This gap became the space for my musings. Since a researcher’s preconceived theory, cultural views, and world experiences influence the study outcomes (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 209), I divulge my dominant educational philosophy as liberal, peppered with the humanist and radical optimism that education can make a significant difference in the lives of learners and their communities. In short, my philosophy frames education as being able to contribute to developing a well-rounded person by enhancing personal growth, critical thinking, and public participation in society resulting in fundamental social, cultural, political, and economic changes. My philosophy also frames my research as pragmatic, striving to produce relevant work that is actionable and useful to society (Creswell, 2007, p. 22).

There are a wide variety of higher education options available to learners today. For rural residents, it often means moving to a larger community in order to study at university or college. The growth of distance education provides a strong option for those individuals wishing an alternative to uprooting their lives to move in order to attain a higher education. An individual’s understanding of the world, the social construction of reality, and personal efficacy to incite change of praxis are inextricably bound to the decisions of where and how to study. We can intuitively see a connection between education and employment in terms of professional prerequisite credentials. We can see how the education of an individual relates to his or her ability to obtain employment. Interestingly, Flora and Flora (2013) point out how the aggregated educational levels of people in a community can attract new businesses to a community. “Employers are increasingly attracted to rural areas offering concentrations of well-educated and skilled workers. A labor force with low educational levels poses challenges for many rural counties seeking economic development” (p. 90). Communities encouraging residents to pursue degrees via distance education can increase their overall education level while maintaining population levels.

**Musing on the Community Impact measurements**

Some qualitative impacts to a community are not traditionally monetized such as social, environmental, and ethical factors (Lauder, Reel, Farmer, & Griggs, 2006, pp. 77-78). Miller (2013) highlights that the social and cultural aspects of learning ultimately lead to economic development (p. 49). For distance learners to stay in their rural communities, means that they can maintain their social, friendship, and religious ties; and may continue with their volunteer work, which is the backbone of many rural community economies (Rennie, 2003, p. 36). Flora and Flora (2013) present a holistic analysis of sustainable communities by outlining seven forms of capital that arise when invested community resources are reinvested to produce more resources. To summarize, they are: natural capital pertaining to the environment; cultural capital of human values and milieu; human capital as the capacity for education, skills, health and self-esteem; social capital as the bonding within groups and bridging between groups; political capital as the ability to create and enforce rules, regulations and the distribution of resources; financial capital of individuals and the community; and built capital being the human constructed infrastructure (p. 10-11). While defined separately, the seven capitals are complexly interrelated. Sustainable communities, whether urban or rural, have strength in each area of capital resources, without emphasizing one over all others (p. 10). Applying the lens of the seven capitals of community resources highlights how distance education can help reinvest community resources to strengthen rural sustainability. If a baseline purpose of education is to develop intellectual powers of the mind as a generally well-rounded citizen, then any distance education opportunities could contribute to a rural resident’s greater participation in society in any of these seven areas. While this may appear to be an obtuse or perhaps glib statement, I posit that this is the strength of my musings. It is worth delving deeper into examples of the intersection between distance education and some of the community capitals.

By definition education directly affects human capital, and indirectly affects financial capital as discussed earlier in terms of employment opportunities for the individual and the community. There are two approaches to positively address employment needs of a community; one is to recruit professionals to move to the remote areas, the other, to develop the capacity from within the given communities to fill professional vacancies. Some distance programs target an employment need in a rural area. The social work degree program at the University of Hawai’i actively recruits distance learners from remote areas of the islands. The university recognized the intrinsic value in training individuals to become social workers within in their home communities (Stotzer, 2012, p. 110). To address the rapidly growing Spanish-speaking K-12 student body, the Nebraska rural school districts encouraged paraprofessional educators already employed in their rural schools to upgrade their education, via distance learning, to obtain a degree in elementary education with an English as a second language endorsement (Dalla et al, 2006, p. 390). Three Texas institutions of higher education[[7]](#footnote-7) collaborated to deliver advanced nursing education at a distance to remote medically underserved areas of Texas in response to the need for an increased number of family nurse practitioners (Varnell, Pollock, Klotz, Green, & Sportsman, 2002, p. 166). These are initiatives driven by community needs.

Education can also affect community changes by addressing learners’ personal needs. Distance learners from marginalized groups, who would not pursue an education through face-to-face institutions, often gain the capacity to contribute to their local economy in new ways (Rashid & Rahman, 2010, p. 94). Distance education has a unique position within the field of education to remove multiple barriers to education.

There are some compelling connections between distance education and natural capital. Roy, Potter, and Yarrow (2006) conducted an environmental audit of full time and part time face-to-face courses as well as print and online distance courses. “The most striking finding is that distance learning reduces the energy and emissions involved in studying a [higher education] course dramatically to only 13-15 per cent of those arising from an equivalent full-time, face-to-face campus-based course” (p. 126). The main contributors to reducing the environmental footprint are related to transporting and housing the student and providing physical teaching spaces. If higher education institutions are serious about “greening” their campuses and reducing their environmental impact they can offer more classes at a distance.

The curriculum taught through distance learning can have a direct impact on rural learners stewardship of the rural environment. In 1992, Kelly studied the effects of continuing education in a rural development project in North West Connemara, Ireland and found, “The process of continuing education is an effective means to increase agricultural production, product quality, and positive inputs in the rural economy” (p. i). Because of the breadth of disciplines taught, distance learning can influence a learner’s contributions in any of the seven community capitals.

Success rates in higher education are closely related to the students’ family of origin, primarily their parents’ level of education and attitude towards the value of education, which are all components of cultural capital. The value the rural community places on education effects the overall education level of the community with potential financial implications as mentioned previously. This is another barrier that distance education traditional helps learners to overcome. For example, seventy percent of Athabasca University graduates are the first in their family to earn a university degree (Athabasca University, 2013, para. 3).

For a distance learner to choose to stay in their rural community means that they can more readily maintain their social networks that they have established in their community, such as with family, friends, work, church, musical bands, and service groups. Being enrolled in higher education outside their rural area, they can also build new communities of interest around their academic pursuits and break down the sense of isolation some rural distance learners experience. In these ways, distance education can enhance a rural community’s social capital.

Of the two remaining capitals, I uncovered the least about political capital and the potential impact distance education can have on it. My educational philosophy leads me to an underlying assumption that the more educated the rural people better equipped they are to participate fully as voters, taxpayers, and elected politicians. This warrants more research.

Both rural sustainability and distance education have a long history of challenges with built capital. Distance education depends heavily on the built infrastructures of transportation and communication, first with postal delivery of print materials, then television and radio broadcasting, and increasingly with e-learning. Today, all of these forms of communication are employed around the world to deliver educational opportunities to rural distance learners. In 2013, the Broadband Commissionreported the incredible potential benefits of mobile broadband to connect rural health care workers to medical specialists and resources outside a rural community, or rural learners to distance education via mobile devices. While the potential for significant change is there, it is important to note that the report, which details 160 economies around the world, states, “Most of the unconnected live in rural emerging economies” (Broadband Commission, 2013, p. 31). In countries where there is strong distribution of Internet connectivity, the digital divide is between urban and rural communities. Korea, which has the highest adoption of 100 Mbps network broadband access to households, at 95.9% of the population, has subscribers in rural areas with access to a network at only 2 Mbps, limiting the delivery of high-speed services (Broadband Commission, 2013, p. 51). The report states, “nearly one-half of the world’s population lives in rural, hard-to-reach areas and satellite technology can play an important role for the delivery of broadband services in those areas” (p. 65). Because of these continued barriers due to the built infrastructure distance education for rural learners is best discussed in terms of the widest use of communication technologies available for educators and learners to connect and not just as e-learning.

**Reverie: A Definition of Musing**

Rather than breaking the reverie of these musings with issues of practicality, let us continue a willing suspension of disbelief, which was described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1847) in the 19th century, as poetic faith needing a semblance of truth to help the audience suspend judgment concerning implausibility of any narrative (p. 422). I think that something interesting can come from hearing the stories of rural distance learners engaged in higher education and asking how they impact rural sustainability. As Guba and Lincoln (2005) recognize, there is no single method, or collection of methods, guaranteed to lead research to ultimate knowledge (p. 205) and "all truths are but partial truths" (p. 212). Exploration at this stage involves me engaging others to discuss the potential of this research at the risk of presenting my musings as not yet fully formed academic research. The first most public of these engagements is a poster presentation delivered at the Conference of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation/Fondation Canadienne pour la Revitalisation Rurale, held in Prince George, Canada on September 25–27, 2014. The image of the poster titled *Rural distance learning: Going to school without going away* is linked from my AU Landing profile searchable at: landing.athabascau.ca.

Suspending disbelief we can contemplate whether and how we can measure the effect of distance learners on the sustainability of the rural communities in which they live and study. While the particular economic impact varies with each individual, it is hoped that by pulling back from the minutia of detail of participants’ individual lives, a broader lens can bring into focus patterns that can be used to deduce impact. It is hoped that with a broad enough lens the nuances of individual choices will blend to reveal discernable patterns, much like a mosaic made up of individual photos. Each photo can have a scene clearly depicted and conveying a rich story. When the viewer’s focus is pulled back far enough, each photo becomes merely a pixel of colour within the larger composite mosaic image. The critical decision making throughout the rich experiential narrative of the individual student’s path that led each to choose to study at a distance from within their rural community is a valid source of knowledge worth researching.

Are there ways to monetize the impact of distance learners on their rural communities? Researchers of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michegan followed a group of individuals for over 20 years before completing their first of a series of reports in which they concluded, what is now a well known adage, that every $1 spent on early childhood education saves the public purse $7 in future costs (Parks, 2000, p. 4). Inference from hard data is an acceptable approach within economics. The *multiplier effect* is how economists project benefits to the general economy of an activity in a particular sector (Heideman, 2011, p. 85). This is how the research firm Civic Economics is able to make the claim that every $1 million of revenue generated by independent restaurants in British Columbia in 2011 spurred over $1.5 million economic output through direct, indirect, and induced impacts (Huston, 2013, p. 15). Models used to forecast the multiplier effect vary by sector and business type (p. 12). We know age, gender, and available time influence the consumption and spending habits of rural residents (Flora and Flora, 2013, p. 317), an examination of rural distance learners’ habits could quantify a direct economic impact. Perhaps data collected on the residential mobility patterns of rural distance learners coupled with average local living expenses could be used to formulate a local monetary effect on a rural community’s economic development. There are many potential impacts that are worth investigating.

Perhaps personal and community network analyses could be the most telling measure of a distance learners’ impact. The impact of distance learning on political capital in rural communities is warranted research since finding literature on that was the most difficult. Doing a follow up study on the residential mobility of graduates of distance education programs that targeted rural residents could show whether they tend to stay in or leave after graduation. I open this to you, as both a set of transparent musings and an expression of desire to explore this topic in synergistic ways with others. This writing is grounded on the assumption that distance education can benefit residents of rural communities. The question for me is how might these benefits be measurable, so as to determine their existence. Many authors take for granted that good can come from promoting distance education to rural communities. I wonder if that is true. I imagine it is. But I am still curious. So I ask: What might be the impacts distance learners have on the rural communities in which they live and study? Let me know your thoughts and what stories you can add.

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4. Government Statistical Service, 2013, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chandramouli, 2011, pp. 11 & 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. United States Census Bureau, 2010, para. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The University of Texas at Tyler, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, and Midwestern State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)