

(Further) Lessons learned: teaching and living at the Millard Learning Centre

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Two years ago I filed a voluntary report to the Board of the Galiano Conservancy Association as reflections of someone who had deep first-hand experience of offering particular types of programmes at the Millard Learning Centre (MLC). I offer further reflections and suggestions in this report with the aim of contributing to the refinement and development of the MLC.

It is a privilege to be part of the early years of the MLC. As with many others in the community, I take a custodial responsibility for the good functioning and success of its operation. How immensely gratifying it is to see that the collective vision is being realized. Having returned to teach a course (August 19-27, 2018) after almost a year away from Galiano, during which my family and I were living in the Netherlands, I was greeted by major investments and improvements in the electrical system, the new washroom (hot water! flush toilets!), the excavations for the new Program Centre, and a instrument cluster connected to the publicly accessible UVic School-based weather network.

Teaching my UVic School of Environmental Studies “Advanced Principles and Practices” (ES 471/ER 412) ecological restoration course in partnership with the Galiano Conservancy Association is a remarkable experience. Reflecting on six(!) years of offering this course—the first offering was February 2013 where students stayed at GIFTS and worked at DL 57—co-hosting an international professional-level workshop (May 2017), helping to negotiate the first formal post-secondary partnership (a Memorandum of Understanding with UVic’s Faculty of Social Sciences, of which the School of Environmental Studies resides), and through my role in helping with the development of the Learning Centre, I offer some perspectives on the experience: what’s working well with facilities, and avenues for improvement.

I acknowledge the constraints of funding and the significance of volunteer and in-kind contributions that have realized the Learning Centre in its present configuration. It is also clear that facilities and infrastructure lie at the heart of successful learning programs. Continued improvement is essential to realize effective social enterprise and the mission of the GCA.

1. The Classroom Building

The Classroom building continues to function beautifully as an adaptable and flexible facility open to a variety of uses. It is now difficult to overstate the importance of this humble but effective building. For the most part, it works very well.

Furniture

The arrival of surplus assets from UVic on July 5, 2016 added significantly to the function and appearance of the main room. The free-standing whiteboard/blackboard has already proved its worth in my class. The thirty coordinated chairs lend a more integrated and cheerful presence.

Needed are:

- Better functioning folding tables to replace the ones that have seen far better days
- Up to thirty lightweight, durable folding chairs that can be used for larger events.

I will continue to work with UVic Surplus Assets to see if other furnishings would be potentially useful, but recommend the folding tables and chairs be purchased separately (i.e., unlikely UVic will have these items available).

Electrical outlets

Surface mounted electrical outlets along the window sides of the classroom at or above table height and with integrated USB outlets would simplify and render more functional a variety of intensive activities. For example, my students each used laptops, tablets, cameras, phones, printers, scanners, and specialized equipment, all of which required electricity. Serving these needs meant clustering in the corners—not ideal given the room configuration—or running long extension cords.

Secure storage

Secure storage of teaching equipment and general infrastructure (e.g., portable speakers) is important. I would, for example, like to leave equipment purchased specifically in support of my course (but available to others) in storage cabinets that are secure, dry, clean, and readily available. This will avoid time lost to set-up and locating equipment, loss, theft, and excessive wear.

I recommend a bank approximately 10' long of lockable deep drawers or cabinets with a durable countertop located under the windows at the northeast corner of the classroom. This would help keep equipment of all kinds secure and organized, as well as providing a valuable counter surface. It would not interfere with the existing food serving area or with other functions of the room.

Cubbies

One of my students had a great idea that I think could work with a variety of groups and activities: a series of cubbies (say, 12x12" each? perhaps 20?) that would be available for storing miscellaneous field gear, electronics, cameras, clothing, & etc. This would help enormously with managing the dispersal of gear during multi-day courses.

Kitchen

The kitchen is used by many people for different purposes. It is likely that my course is one of the most intensive users of the kitchen. The kitchen requires some regular "love," which

includes re-purposing of excessive duplicate or ineffective gadgets, small repair and maintenance, and cycling of dry storage foods and refrigerated items.

Some specific suggestions, roughly in order of importance:

- Provide a more robust **propane bib** on the outside of the building to support the stove. Having worked extensively with propane, I regard this as an important **safety** consideration. As Esther-Ruth Teel reminded me, the existing copper flexible line was installed in July 2015 just hours before my course commenced with Erik Wilkinson's comment, "this should get you through to the end of the course."
- Replace **propane outdoor fridge** with an electrical one, which could perhaps be located in the basement. It is evident that larger programs such as mine require a secondary fridge/freezer. More than this, the fridge was donated by Herb Hammond as part of the ASPA building: it is of uncertain reliability and safety (I worry about propane safety). Removing it would also have the added benefit of reducing clutter on the kitchen porch, which is often is the first thing people see when arriving at the classroom.
- Reverse the **main sink taps**, and repair leaks (need new washers). The natural flow of dish washing activity is from right-to-left, despite my various efforts at social re-engineering(!). The taps are presently designed for a left-to-right flow of activity. Switching them is a relatively easy task and would *significantly* improve cleaning effectiveness.
- New solid wood **countertop** near fridge (to match function of countertop on other side of room); the existing plywood top is almost certainly not "food safe.";
- **Inventory and assess** cooking pots, serving bowls, and other kitchen basics. My courses and the professional workshop were graced by the Teel sisters, who have a direct pipeline to the Mary-Ruth and Loren Wilkinson's kitchen gear, but this is clearly not an arrangement that works widely. A clear **wish list** of kitchen essentials would facilitate donations and purchases.
- **Pot rack or hooks** for overhead mounting of pots and pans (freeing up cupboard space);
- Provide **temporary mouse-proof food storage** in the basement. We have used an area near the gear storage, but this is not designated space.
- High efficiency **toaster oven** for small-scale baking/broiling. This avoids using the large oven; I loaned mine for the course);
- Purchase or have donated a **heavy duty stand mixer**.

Electrical systems

The electrical system upgrades in 2018 made working in the kitchen and classroom so much easier. Through most of the course, we ran entirely on solar. During two days of cloudy, rainy weather the battery level started to drop to a low level (60%). Keith was able to advise on how to switch the electrical feed from solar to grid, which then recharged the batteries and provided ample power.

Two measures would help improve user experience.

1. Clear **signage** indicating appropriate use of the electrical system, with instructions on how to switch, as needed, from battery-to-grid and vice versa.
2. Clear and motivating signage and briefings on how to be **mindful of electrical use**. Despite good intentions, I was struck this year how much less awareness there was

of electrical consumption. Such awareness is good in general, and especially during the transition, when electrical consumption exceeds the MLC's solar capacity and there are direct costs to the GCA.

2. Washroom and toilet facilities

The new washroom and toilet facilities are brilliant, and made a tangible difference to my students, who were engaged in hot, sweaty fieldwork and very full days of activity. Apart from plans underway to finish up details on the new facility, I offer the following suggestions:

1. **Floor.** The rough surface concrete is non-slip, but difficult to clean. Especially during muddy, wet times the facility will become quite dirty, which tends to provide negative motivation for keeping it maintained. Could some (relatively) inexpensive tile be considered? Good tile would be non-slip and easy to sweep and mop.
2. **Dual flush toilets.** Conservation of water will be helped with dual flush toilets. These are more expensive, but in the long run with heavier facility use they will pay off in terms of reduced water consumption. They send out a signal to users that water conservation is an important consideration.

3. Site considerations

1. **Gate protocols.** We had a minor incident that caused some concern during my course. Sometime after midnight, an unknown car drove down the driveway to the classroom, lingered briefly, and drove away. My group this year, which comprised seventeen women and one man, underscored that the sense of safety at the site could be easily compromised. This incident, which fortunately had no consequences, highlighted the potential for a more effective gate at the top of the road that could be closed during certain hours while people were on site. Improved signage at the gate would also help.
2. **Emergency contact signage.** Effective signage with emergency and key contacts should be developed, printed, laminated and posted in the kitchen and classroom areas. This should include contacts for medical, fire, and police emergencies, what to do in the event of a natural disaster (i.e., where is the nearest muster site on the Island?), and key GCA contacts in the event of an emergency.
3. **Removal or relocation of compost toilets.** The compost toilets are awkwardly positioned for several reasons, especially now that they are seldom used. Essential as they were in the early days of the classroom building, they are now occupying a central area for outside activities and present a less-than-compelling visual barrier.
4. **Access trails.** Now that significant construction is completed near the classroom, plans can be implemented for landscaping and access trails. The "default" access to the classroom is along the west side of the building, which makes sense for deliveries, vehicle access, and so on. For the majority of visitors who will be enter by foot, a carefully constructed trail could be built to serve the east side. This would be a more direct access to the classroom, and reduce sometimes awkward access to the classroom via the kitchen (i.e., for new visitors, the main entrance at the south side of the building is far from obvious).

4. Building/site maintenance

Caretaker. The complexity of operating the Classroom building warrants an occasional caretaker, someone who can monitor propane, ensure facilities are cleaned by departing groups and ready for new ones, attend to straightforward maintenance (e.g., firewood, lightbulbs), and be on-call for site questions. This would not be a time-consuming task, at least initially. As the

infrastructure develops (i.e., the Program Centre), a volunteer position might grow into part-time paid responsibilities.

5. Data Management and Archiving

With six years of “Advanced Principles and Practices of Ecological Restoration,” it is time to think about long-term, robust data management and archiving. This could take two forms:

1. A dedicated location on the galianoconservancy.ca **website** that would present publicly available reports and data. As other university courses and research projects contribute data, these could also be made available.
2. **Paper archives** prove useful over time, and the GCA has benefitted from having extensive published and grey literatures in its collection. Would there be benefit in printing and binding the student reports from my course, and encouraging other projects and programs to do the same?

6. Post Secondary Partnerships

It has always been my intention to ensure my course meets and exceeds expectations, including financial ones. This includes covering direct costs of facility rental, significant professional service payment to the GCA (in 2018, \$1,200), equipment provision, and in-kind support of various kinds.

I continue to view the course as a *partnership* between the School of Environmental Studies and the Galiano Conservancy Association. We are working toward mutually agreeable goals. Over time, and with the existing Memorandum of Understanding between the GCA and UVic’s Faculty of Social Sciences (of which the School of Environmental Studies is one of seven academic units), there is potential to expand learning programs and research. This serves as a model for building relationships with other post-secondary institutions.

While learning programs are clearest fit with activities at the Millard Learning Centre, research is a vital basis for learning. A good example of this was the recent underwater camera live view session hosted by Desirée Bulger and Sonia Voicescu for visiting Vancouver-based students at Montague Harbour. The demonstration would not have been possible without technical experience, graduate research, faculty involvement, and collaboration with the GCA. Research distinguishes university based activities from primary and secondary education.

There is, then, a growing argument for creating a distinctive liaison between universities and the GCA. There are two evident pathways. One is to expand the purview of the Education Committee and staff to include university programs. The other is to create a new approach to liaison that both nurtures existing relationships and strategically builds new ones. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. I would be happy to discuss the best way forward.