There's no there there.
- Gertrude Stein (on Oakland, California)

There's no there there.
- William Gibson (on cyberspace)

Where is the academy? Where is our academic community? Is it in the halls and classrooms of the faculty of education? Is it in the schools and research sites we study in? Is it in the pages (both paper and bits) of the journals and books we read and write in?

As the business of education and academia increasingly takes on a "virtual" aspect -- as in an electronic journal, for instance -- this question of place is raised anew. But there's nothing new about it. The cyberspace that sci-fi writer William Gibson was talking about has, perhaps, existed for as long as we have had texts, and for as long as those texts circulated from scholar to scholar, embodying ideas, stories, and views beyond the individuals and places from whence they came.

Consider the old "textual communities" of the monastic period, the precursors of our universities and colleges. Where did they exist? Were they constituted in the isolated monasteries, clinging to offshore rocks and crags, where early scholars did their work? Or did those communities exist in the odd non-space of text, displaced from regular space and time? Did it make a difference that outside the window lay Iona's windswept meadows, Skellig Michael's pounding sea, or the Syrian desert?

In a sense, it would appear not. Our modern universities house a global community of scholars. A campus in Calgary is not so different from one in Montreal. The ivy on the walls, the footpaths through grassy lawns, the classrooms, libraries -- all so generic. The development of modern research laboratories has led to even more purposeful standardization, in the name of the replicability of results. We sit, on a hot summer's day, on the manicured lawn beneath shady oaks, surrounded by brick and concrete buildings, and discuss this sense of place. We could be anywhere.
The University of British Columbia is set, spectacularly, on a high bluff overlooking the grey-blue expanse of Georgia Strait. It is entirely surrounded by a buffer of coastal rainforest -- Pacific Spirit Park. The steep banks leading down to the ocean beaches bear the last remnants of old-growth forest: creaking, storm-smashed snags of ancient Douglas-fir; misshapen, hulking bigleaf maple; and the lush understory of salmonberry, salal, and oceanspray. Within the more official boundaries of this campus is an astounding set of gardens, boulevards, and arboreta, thriving in Vancouver's moist, mild climate: massive elms and oaks share space with giant sequoia, ornamental cherries, and sweetgums. Grey squirrels, enormous raccoons, and coyotes all live here, sometimes at the apparent peril of students coming late from the library.

Does any of this matter at all to what goes on within our classrooms and seminar rooms? Does anyone even notice all this lush greenery? The architecture of the place makes few concessions to our natural environment; the mild climate at UBC means we do not have underground passageways, as other Canadian campuses do. The First Nations House of Learning stands utterly unique here in its glass-and-timbers recollection of the more traditional architecture of this coast. The same climate that produces the big trees perhaps leads to a preponderance of Gore-Tex and fleece slung over the backs of the chairs in our seminar rooms, but does it go beyond this?

The academy has always existed in text. Our practice as academics is primarily reading and writing. The scholarly journal has, in some senses, been a more solid embodiment of academia in the past few centuries than all the brick and ivy. Bringing a scholarly journal -- and the scholarly community it represents -- online reinforces this. Perhaps this is where scholarly discourse has always been meant to be. And yet, the business of the university still retains a significant amount of attention paid to lectures, seminars, and, in some cases, orals. Is this a quaint anachronism, like the sworn oral testimony that still underpins a legal system otherwise dominated by billions and billions of pages of text? Will we, do you think, lose the local quality of academic life in this next century? And if we do, what else will we lose?

Does it matter where you go to school? Or where you teach? Does it matter beyond the inconvenient details of winter weather, parking spaces, or restaurant choices? Are we academics really a global community, a sort of textual jet-set? Or is there something more significant in the spaces we inhabit, the musty rooms we frequent, the colours we see out the windows, the blossoms and bird calls we encounter while on the march from one campus building to the next? Does our academic community -- your academic community -- depend upon the particular cascade of seasons, the smell of the wind, the colour of dirt, the taste of the water, where you are?
- John Maxwell
  Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction
  University of British Columbia
  jmax@portal.ca