St. Francis Xavier University

The Importance of Place:
Exploring Informal Learning for Community Leadership Through Auto-ethnography

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Abstract

This research, taking shape as an auto-ethnography, fills a gap amongst existing literature regarding the relationship between place and learning, specifically, the connecting of spatial elements to adult education for community-based action. Seeking to answer the question of how learning experiences—embedded within community development efforts—have impacted my leadership skill development, this research identifies key learnings which are likely to foster the development of community-based leadership skills while highlighting to what extent place shapes this process. Using my experiences as the primary source of data, research activities are focused on three distinct periods of practice between 2007 and 2017; these periods formed the basis for an autobiographical reconstruction generated through reflections focused on artifacts, snapshots, and metaphors. Themes which emerged from the research included the following: leadership is relational; curiosity supports learning; reflection is essential for self-care; identity develops while participating; and place is constructed through understanding. Although this research did not intend to evaluate the definition of place given its complex nature, a reconceptualization is offered which elaborates on what may constitute a place to provide both personal and expanded understandings of the term.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, autoethnography, community development, identity, informal learning, leadership, place, reflection, relationships

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since 2007, my development as a community leader has been shaped significantly by experiences rooted in community-based work. The learning I experience, while participating in these efforts, often resonates more deeply with me than formal education. When considering such situated learning experiences, one aspect of interest is how feeling connected to specific places may shape my growth as a community leader. The purpose of this auto-ethnography is to investigate what role *place* has in shaping the learning experiences that are most influential for developing *leadership* skills within *community*. This research aims to fill one small gap amongst existing literature regarding the relationship between place and learning: the connecting of spatial elements to adult education for community-based action.

Background to this Study

My interest in leadership is based on a perspective that within a community, any member can assume a role of leadership. In looking beyond individuals who assume roles that characterize management more than leadership (Hanold, 2015), I am interested in how informal leaders—that is, individuals without specific hierarchical roles or titles (Wheatley, 2009)—take full control of their own position in society (Coady, 1939; Freire, 1970) to assume leadership roles in their communities. In considering the leadership roles that I have held throughout my career, I am reminded that the most rewarding and valuable ones were those that I undertook with no formal permission, title, or recognition. Such roles have proven to provide me the opportunity to make significant impact, within a community, without being hindered or directed by politics, organizational mandates, administrative procedures, or bureaucratic processes. I have found that these types of informal leadership roles allow for my work to remain connected to the

communities I aim to serve while limiting outside influences from individuals or organizations such as funders, politicians, and private interest groups.

Building upon the work of Lindeman (1982), which values lived experience above all else, McKee (2014) and Shor (1992) provide the foundation of a theory where every site—space or place—can be transformed into one of learning. This connection, between space and learning, provides an initial point from which to investigate the impact place has on an individual's growth as a community leader. However, even with a clearly identified link between learning and where it transpires, the topic itself has not received the focus it may deserve within adult education literature (Gruenewald, 2003; Nesbit & Wilson, 2010). Likewise, when considering community-based action, Foroughi and Durant (2013) note that existing research efforts have neglected to connect spatial elements to adult education. This gap presents an opportunity for this research to contribute new thoughts and additional value to the scholarly landscape.

Statement of Research Problem

The purpose of this research is to investigate what role place plays in shaping the learning experiences most influential for developing community leadership skills. To do so, I examine select community leadership roles I assumed between 2007 and 2017 through acts of critical reflection. Research findings are then situated within the context of scholarly literature to build an appreciation of the learning experiences most influential in developing the skills essential to lead in community and to understand to what extent place helps to foster such skills.

Research Questions

The primary research question that guides this work is:

- How have learning experiences, embedded within community development efforts, impacted my leadership skill development?

The following related sub-questions are also given consideration:

- What have I been learning? How?
  - How does my understanding of place shape the learning I have experienced in specific spaces?
- How have I developed as a leader?
  - How does my relationship to spaces in community impact the likelihood that I, or others, will view myself as a leader?

Delimitations and Limitations

While best intentioned, any research always has constraints; this research project is no different. Delimitations—regarding the scope of data considered, the experiences reflected upon, and the limitations related to the inclusion of cultural, political, and social elements—must all be considered when reviewing the data, findings, and interpretations outlined here within. The scope of this research is defined by periods of professional practice within my professional portfolio (Van Lierop, 2017) and intentionally excludes experiences which fall outside of these temporal boundaries. This decision was made to help align research efforts with existing, available information regarding these periods of practice. This decision may be limiting, insomuch as it fails to consider any experience before or after the dates specified. Given that all research requires some type of boundaries, to provide focus and to be wholly manageable by the researcher, this choice was deemed to be appropriate. This research focuses on my personal experience as the primary source of data and excludes the mentioning of other individuals, or

identifiable organizations, in the reflective accounts. This information was intentionally omitted to respect the privacy of others (see Ethical Considerations). As not all possible experiences could be reflected upon, including those that may have included some of my most valuable learning, gaps may exist in the raw data. I trust that the data captured for this research is substantial for the goals it aims to achieve.

The major limitation of this work is the integration and mention of cultural, political, and social elements within the raw data. While in an auto-ethnography the researcher is also the subject, and thus has some control over the process of data collection, there is still a need to distance these unique roles. Steps were taken to guide myself as subject, through reflective journaling, to consider the essential cultural, political, and social elements (see Chapter 3: Methods of Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation). However, at some point in the process, a researcher must shift their attention from being concerned with the quality of the data itself to becoming immersed in the act of reflection as the subject. This is similar to how an interviewer may guide an interviewee using suggestive questions, to elicit answers relevant to the research topic, but who is unable to fully control what thoughts the interviewee ultimately shares. The content of this research report assumes that the reader will have some familiarity with the fields of adult education, community development, leadership, and place. Any reader may find that the definition of place in this report may not necessarily align with their understanding of the term. While the concept of place can be complex and nuanced, it is understood that the reader will be open to appreciating that different meanings of the term may need to be considered.

Positionality

Making use of my personal experiences as the primary source of data situates me at the centre of the research, as both subject and researcher. As such, it is important to recognize how

my positionality may influence the selected methodology, acts of data generation, analysis, and interpretation. Although I share what is believed to be most important to help explain my positionality, to respect my privacy, I have selected to exclude specific details as needed. As a community leader, and educator at a post-secondary institution, I am granted some established power and social status because I am a North American, middle class, white male. Some, but not all, of this power has come as a result of who I am biologically, and for this I am fully aware. With that said, my experiences as a contributing member of the communities I am a part of also afforded me valuable perspectives, and biases, which inform my work.

Growing up in poverty—in what is considered a low income family in Canada (Government of Canada, 2016)—I am a first-generation graduate student. To be where I am today, both academically and professionally, has required an investment of my own time, energy, and resources. I believe this has earned me certain rights, power, and status based on my abilities. With that said, I live a relatively sheltered life in comparison to many of the populations I aim to serve. This position in society creates a specific lens through which I complete both research and professional work. Because of this, I acknowledge that this research is based upon a single perspective amongst many, and a reading of this research should take this into consideration. Equally important to note is that I do not currently consider myself an active community leader. I am what I would classify as a Non-Leader (see Characterization of Periods). I draw attention to this as my understanding of the data, and its connection to existing scholarly work, are formed from what I would consider an outsider's perspective—someone who is not an active participant in a community or in a formal leadership role. Given this fact, I recognize that some comments regarding data, or interpretations of available literature, may not directly align with current trends or best practices within the field of community development.

Definition of Terms

To help interpret the findings of this research, and to clarify the meaning of complex terms, the following definitions should be referenced throughout this report. When mentioning the concept of **place**, I draw from the work of Johnson (2012) to consider it as a "location endowed with meaning" (p. 830). As an individual's perception of, and connection to, a given location is personal, what comprises meaning is highly subjective. For the purposes of this report, every attempt is made to articulate how I interpret meaning embedded within locations.

When considering **leadership**, this report relies on Margaret Wheatley's understanding of the term. In her 2009 book, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Wheatley describes the role of a leader as "anyone willing to help, anyone who sees something that needs to change and takes the first steps to influence that situation" (p. 132). This definition is referenced as it aligns with my personal experience of what community leadership entails while allowing for roles, from across my practice, to be interpreted and analysed.

Given this research investigates how place shapes community leadership, it is critical to also understand what is meant by the term **community**. Bradshaw (2008) suggests defining community based on a common identity rather than only spatial concepts because "[p]aces are not necessarily communities" (p. 5). Consistent with my experience that many communities do not centre on geographies, location, or place, this definition was selected as it goes, "beyond the confines of place" (Mathie & Cunningham, 2008, p. 7). Interpreting community in this manner allows for place to be used as a common joining element between members, as it often is, but also accounts for the changing habits and movements of members which may negate the influence of place altogether, whereby they choose to form a community around non-geographic elements.

Research Methodology

Auto-ethnography was selected as the methodology for this research as it allows me to leverage awareness of my own practice within cultural, social, and political contexts (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Bochner, & Tillman-Healy, 1997). In addressing my practice, this research will contribute to developing a broader knowledge base, making concepts understandable, relatable, and accessible to non-academic audiences through the sharing of intimate experiences. This research intends to inform a broader understanding of how community leadership skills are fostered while leveraging personal accounts which may resonate with others who have had similar experiences within community.

Throughout the research process, the act of introspection has offered me opportunities to grow the understanding I have of myself, to recognize and appreciate the contributions I make in community, and to identify my core strengths as a leader while highlighting areas where additional skill development could be beneficial. A focus of this investigation is to identify the biases I hold in both learning and in practice, and the limits I have as an individual, learner, community member, and leader. In situating myself among the contextual elements of culture, time, place, society, and politics, it has become apparent how these elements shape my development and inform the biases I hold (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017; Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008).

In selecting auto-ethnography, a research methodology that uses personal experiences to describe and interpret experiences, beliefs, and practices, my goal is to understand and share my experiences "in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of [my] struggles" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 111). As someone who assumes leadership roles within the communities I serve, I believe that it is appropriate to study my own practice as one way to build

an appreciation of the conditions which foster community leadership skills. Additionally, given that this research project blends together both academic interests and personal curiosity regarding professional growth, selecting a methodology that combines both seems fitting.

While self-study and narrative inquiry are two methodologies which also use study of individual accounts, privileging self through autobiographical and narrative methods similar to auto-ethnography, they were not selected for use in this research. As I am not reflecting upon my practice to improve aspects of it, nor am I determining the meaning of a particular experience and telling about it in a story (Kramp, 2004), both of these methodologies were deemed to be less appropriate than auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography was selected, for it does the following particularly well: it considers culture, context, time, and place; it values personal stories and uses these stories as a basis for deconstructing a particular phenomenon; and it makes use of personal experience as data to inform research efforts (Adult Education Department, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2008).

Overview of Report

The content of this research report is organized under a series of headings which outline its purpose, process, and results. It begins with a review of existing literature across the fields of informal learning, community development, and place. This review helps to establish a foundation of understanding and to highlight opportunities for future research efforts. Next, the methods which were followed for the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data are detailed. These methods include the act of forming an autobiographical reconstruction and the coding & categorizing of the data. Noted is the theoretical framework used to interpret the findings of this research along with influential scholars. Thoughts on the trustworthiness of this research are offered along with ethical considerations related to completing an auto-ethnography.

An emphasis is then placed on presenting the data and findings of the research. Each of the three professional periods studied are characterized to identify the following: how, and what, I learn; my development as a leader; and the impact reflection, relationships, and place have on my personal growth. Next, significant findings found amongst the data are identified across topics such as learning, reflection, relationships, leadership, and place. Discussed is the importance of the data and findings in relation to the questions that guide this research. An examination of the research's emerging themes then takes place, which highlights the importance of self-care, reflection, the relationships we foster, being open and adaptable to experiences, and how the concept of place is understood. Context for this discussion of findings is provided both by the theoretical framework which guides this research and the existing scholarly work related to adult learning, community development, and place. Finally, the significance of this research and its findings are considered. The intended purpose of this research is reviewed beside its actual outcomes, and consideration is given to how the findings relate to existing academic literature. The implications of this work— suggestions for next steps, potential future research, and a reconsideration of how we understand learning, community, leadership, and place—are offered as a conclusion to this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

With a shared history, adult education and community development are closely linked (Coady, 1939; English & Mayo, 2012; Freire, 1970; Mathie & Cunningham, 2008; Shaw & Crowther, 2014). The review which follows uncovers how learning, leadership, and civic life are connected by examining an existing body of research. This review covers literature across three broad areas of interest: informal learning, community development, and place. First, consideration is given to informal learning and the importance of both reflection and educators in

the process of adult education. Then, an overview of community development is presented by defining the term community, recognizing the roles that citizens play in community development efforts, and understanding how leadership is fostered. Attention is then given to place in relation to space, the differing perspectives on these concepts, and the sites of learning within a community. Next, a summary is offered which considers power, social capital, and how the relationship between individuals and collectives are all related to learning and community. The findings of this review help to identify theoretical gaps within the literature and provide the necessary context for the decisions and actions taken throughout this research. Given that the relationship between adult education and place is often only discussed in terms of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003; Johnson, 2012; Kudryavtsev, Stedman, & Krasny, 2012; Nesbit & Wilson, 2010), this review suggests that additional scholarly efforts could focus on how adult education and place connect to community development for the purpose of fostering leadership.

Informal Learning

Within adult education, it can be unclear where one type of learning ends and another begins; therefore, it is important to recognize the relationship between the three types of learning: formal—"intentional, planned, structured, systematic education provided from school" (Chang, 2014, p. 111); nonformal—"organized education taking place outside the formal education system" (Boeren, 2011, p. 335); and informal—"all other learning activities, to include self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization" (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008, p. 50). To help differentiate between each type of learning, scholars have provided diagrams (Boeren, 2011) and context-specific definitions (Peeters et al., 2014). However, even with these resources providing direction, it can be challenging to pinpoint where and when informal learning transpires given its unique yet abundant nature.

Informal learning is made up of three distinct forms of learning—self-directed, incidental, and tacit—and these forms of learning can be found across the three domains of life: professional, educational, and personal (Boeren, 2011; Chang, 2014; Delaney, 2010; Gouthro, 2010; Mackean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014). However, ubiquitous as it may be, informal learning is often neglected in study due to the difficulty in pinpointing where and when it happens (Mackean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Peeters et al., 2014). Peeters et al. (2014) offer an assessment of informal learning as a field of study, providing an origin from where to build an appreciation of this commonly neglected form of learning. In alluding to a lack of available insights, which can make informal learning challenging to speak of, Peeters et al. identify the feelings of illegitimacy that exist amongst educators and scholars when compared to their relationship to, understanding of, and focus on other forms of learning.

To better understand and facilitate informal learning, educators should recognize the value of lived experiences. Lindeman (1982) asserts that "the resource of highest value in adult education is the *learner's experience*" (p. 121, emphasis in original). This claim is supported by the work of Delaney (2010) and Freire (1970) who understand that experiences can promote consciousness raising, and both individual and community empowerment. Building upon *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), Shor (1992) addresses experiences in the form of participation, emphasizing that education acts as "a door to empowerment" (p. 17); it is a "complex experience" (p. 23) that is contextually relevant to any given point in an individual's life. Coady (1939) shares a similar opinion in believing that experiences shape an individual's attitude, environment, and the world around them.

Even for all the value it may provide, informal learning is not perfect. Peeters et al. (2014) caution that informal learning has limitations. Given that most learning is a blend of the various types, identifying where informal learning begins and ends can be challenging. Ultimately, any credit given to one form of learning must also take into consideration the contributions of the others. Gore (1990), Knowles, Horton III, and Swanson (2005), and Prins and Drayton (2010) all recognize the difficulty in identifying informal learning and agree that educators play an essential role in helping learners to appreciate the value of such experiences. As deriving meaning from informal learning can be challenging for both learners and educators, it may not always be possible in the absence of reflection (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014).

Reflection's Importance. Regardless of the community, culture, or environment where learning occurs, reflection is an important element of adult education. Consistent with Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, which values reflection as an integral part of experiential learning, and the seminal work of Schön (1983), which insists on the importance of reflection amongst practitioners, Mündel and Schugurensky (2008) identify reflection as a tool for developing consciousness. Freire (1970) too brings attention to the value of reflection in working towards the development of what he calls, conscientização, or critical consciousness—the ability to "perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35).

Given that leaning happens primarily through doing and then reflecting after the fact, developing a praxis is essential for building upon an individual's experience, for it aids in explaining their actions and beliefs (Freire, 1970; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014). For the purposes of informal learning, reflection becomes increasingly more important.

As informal learning cannot be planned, intentional and deliberate reflection—following an experience—is necessary to assist individuals in recognizing their learning progress (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014). Both educators and learners, who acknowledge that space and time must be allocated for deliberate reflection, create the conditions vital for an individual's growth (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). Allocating the space needed for reflection can help to differentiate between Freire's (1970) understanding of learners as either Objects or Subjects—the former, a result of a banking model approach to education, and the latter, a critical component in a problem posing approach to learning.

Brookfield and Preskill (2009), Mündel and Schugurensky (2008), and Shor (1992) all stress that intentional and collective critical reflection can bring together individual perspectives for the common good. However, Mündel and Schugurensky suggest a need to proceed with caution if reflection is facilitated within volunteer-based organizations. Participating in reflective practices, as part of these associations, can potentially increase awareness of "regressive elements" within both individuals and organizations—an outcome that can lead to decreased contributions or reduced effectiveness (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008, p. 57). The same can be true of educators who facilitate reflective activities in traditional learning environments. Even for the purposes of fostering "[e]mpowered students [to] make meaning and act from reflection" (Shor, 1992, p. 12), educators should avoid imposing any personal biases (Gore, 1990; Prins & Drayton, 2010) or hierarchical power structures upon learners (Gaventa, 2006).

Educators are not absolved from participating in reflection themselves. Coady (1939) suggests that "the teacher who refuses to criticize conditions as they exist invites suspicion" (p. 112). hooks (1994) recommends that for educators to feel greater comfort within—and less threatened by—the environments where they serve learners, they should be "concerned with

[their] inner well-being" (p. 17). By reflecting upon their own practice, educators develop both personally and professionally which can, as a result, improve their actions and beliefs (Freire, 1970; Gore, 1990).

Role of Educators. As a tool to develop a more active citizenry, Coady (1939) believes that education can "enable the intellectual being to use his intellect in such a way as to determine which things are possible and which things are not" (p. 37). For Freire (1970), the purpose of education is human and class liberation; hooks (1994) agrees with Freire, labelling education as "the practice of freedom" (p. 4). Building upon Freire's notion of critical consciousness, McKee (2014) and Shor (1992) see education more traditionally—as a tool and resource to be used. Taking these broad perspectives into consideration, what then is the role of an educator?

In considering the co-operative power of individuals to be "masters of their own destiny," Coady (1939) understands that educators can empower learners to appreciate their rich experiences and express themselves; alternatively, Westoby and Shevellar (2016) situate educators along a spectrum, from instructor to reformist. Knowles et al. (2005) encourage educators to "enable each individual to achieve his or her full and unique potential" (p. 260) while McKee (2014) suggests that practitioners should "build on students' strengths to increase their capacity" (p. 72). Although most scholars agree that educators function as leaders who can release the power in others, some take this idea further. hooks (1994) considers educators as healers; Freire (1970) identifies them as comrades and not as masters; and Coady sees them as leaders of economic change. In contrast, McKee (2014), Peeters et al. (2014), and Shor (1992) consider educators in more traditional teaching roles. This relationship, between teacher and student, can be mutually beneficial. Freire (1970), hooks (1994), and Shor (1992) suggest that in the process of co-creating learning experiences, teachers can grow and be empowered but only if

they allow themselves to be vulnerable while working with learners. However, educators should be aware of the hierarchical relationships and power structures they operate within as to not instruct learners based on their personal needs, biases, or experiences (Freire, 1970; Gaventa, 2006; Gore, 1990; hooks, 1994; Mathie & Gaventa, 2015; Prins & Drayton, 2010; Shor, 1992).

Scholars agree that informal learning can happen almost anywhere (Chang, 2014; Delaney, 2010; Mackean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011), with volunteer and community development roles providing valuable experiences (Gouthro, 2010; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). With a shared history, adult education and community development are closely linked (Coady, 1939; English & Mayo, 2012; Freire, 1970; Mathie & Cunningham, 2008; Shaw & Crowther, 2014), and any review of relevant literature should contain perspectives on both.

Community Development

How a community develops depends both on the actions of its members and factors external to it. Given this complex makeup, scholars regularly study the ways in which community is defined to form an appreciation of how and why it evolves. In better understanding the foundations of community, informal learning can be more closely integrated for the purposes of encouraging a participatory democracy and the fostering of leadership.

Understanding Community. Traditionally, scholars have categorized community into two distinct groups: spatial or geographic, and functional or symbolic (Delaney, 2010, pp. 9–10). Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, and in recent years, more inclusive definitions of community have been investigated; some of these definitions consider how embedded cultures shape where people gather and how individuals understand their relationship to one another. Bradshaw (2008) considers community beyond a defining element of geographic place, stating

that "[p]aces are not necessarily communities" (p. 5). This outlook begins to debate that ambiguity may exist in traditional place-based understandings of community. Offering an alternative, Bradshaw suggests that a common identity might be a more worthwhile way to define community, for it considers the changing habits and movements of members. Such an understanding of community goes, as Mathie and Cunningham (2008) state, "beyond the confines of place" (p. 7). Even so, scholars, such as Johnson (2012) and Gruenewald (2003), propose that localness still be considered since it is a commonality found among differing knowledge systems.

Other scholars consider the idea of community more in terms of its economic, cultural, or relational characteristics than merely those of a geographic nature. Coady (1939) maintains a belief that economic cooperation is the backbone of all communities, a concept supported by Bridger and Alter's (2006) assertion that economic changes have the power to alter "the relationships between people and the relationships between people and places" (p. 11). Johnson (2012) is concerned that there is a missing connection to "the significant cultural histories and moralities which, once upon a time, where [sic] stored within our storied landscapes"—specifically, the "depths of meaning attached to place by Indigenous, oral societies" (p. 831). This need to connect culture to community and place is consistent with Gruenewald's (2003) framework for place-conscious education. Further connecting cultural perspectives to community development, Mathie, Cameron, and Gibson (2017) consider the traditional African ethic of Ubuntu, focusing on the interconnectedness between individuals and the collectives they belong to. Defining community not only by location but through cultures, histories, and interests has the potential to build an appreciation of cultural and religious associations as essential sites where communities can be found and fostered (Chang, 2014; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

As individuals become connected to a community, they may choose to participate more in its ongoing development. Coady (1939), Delaney (2010), and Mathie and Cunningham (2008) indicate that as individuals show greater interests in shaping their community, a shift occurs in their perceptions of themselves and the actions they take. Such a shift sees community members transitioning from being clients of the structures and organizations they have existed within to active participants who play an essential role in shaping their community and the broader society around them (Mathie & Cunningham, 2008).

Active Citizenship and Participatory Democracy. Mathie and Gaventa (2015) identify active citizenship along two dimensions: vertical, how citizens interact with, shape, and claim rights when dealing with government, and horizontal, how citizens interact with each other out of a sense of civic duty (p. 5). Delaney (2010) recognizes the role of citizens when considering a participatory democracy approach to building community. Delaney understands that as citizens interact with one another to improve the common good, they contribute to a "collective knowledge that informs community action" (p. 75). Both Coady (1939) and Freire (1970) recognize that it is only when individuals come together in a collective—and take full control of their own position in society—that they begin to create the change they wish to see. Taking this understanding further, Coady sees the outcome of such a collective approach as one that benefits all of society, suggesting that a group of active citizens—who are willing to work to improve their conditions—may be the "only hope of democracy" (p. 18). Although Peeters et al. (2014) identify that the actions of citizens may serve a broader purpose, both Delaney (2010) and Gouthro (2010) caution that individuals who are more active in their community may do so with self-serving motivations. Rather than the act of contribution being the primary motivator, individuals may use their positions of influence to obtain individual objectives even if their

motives are misaligned with the best interests of a larger community (Delaney, 2010; Gouthro, 2010; Schweigert, 2007).

Understanding the roles which citizens play in their community is as important as knowing why individuals choose to take on active roles. Mathie and Cunningham (2008) see a transition in communities, and their members, as noted by the title of their collection, *From Clients to Citizens*. As citizens take greater ownership over their wellbeing, working with—and often against—governments and established organizations, they can form a common identity and become further empowered to create change (Coady, 1939; English & Mayo, 2012). Mathie and Gaventa (2015) have succinctly summarized this transition of community members in stating that citizens become "'makers and shapers' of their own future, not just 'users and choosers' of services and options defined by others" (p. 6).

While citizens may assume greater responsibility in shaping their community, a role remains for government and corporations in the development process (English & Mayo, 2012). Gouthro (2010), Mathie and Gaventa (2015), and Shaw and Crowther (2014) recommend that citizens should be actively engaged, throughout processes of consultation and collaboration, as new laws and policies are created by governments and by other authoritative organizations. At the same time, citizens should be aware of the competing or ulterior motives of the commercial or administrative entities they engage with. Shaw and Crowther warn that corporate or state interests can have a level of influence over local democracy and may "prevail at the expense of community interests" (p. 398). Kretzman and McKnight (1993) and Mathie et al. (2017) emphasize that if the focus of community development activities are not on the needs of the community, citizens may become preoccupied with the business of the state rather than improving their own conditions. Citizens should keep this in mind while working to develop

authentic communities for the betterment of all, ensuring that the vested interests of others do not negate any progress they wish to make (Gaventa, 2006; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Mathie, Cameron, & Gibson, 2017). As citizens become more active in shaping their communities, they can transition from constituents to members, and ultimately, to leaders (Mathie & Cunningham, 2008). Given that the efforts of leadership, for community development purposes, can often be under-appreciated, it is critical for practitioners to know how to identify and foster effective leadership for citizen-led change (Madsen & Hammond, 2005).

Fostering Leadership. As with developing community, fostering new leadership should begin with the individuals it aims to benefit. Acting as leaders themselves within the process of community development, practitioners play an important role in identifying likely leaders (Freire, 1970; Knowles, Horton III, & Swanson, 2005; Shor, 1992). While the process may not be easy, it is important that practitioners work with community members to support their transition from clients to citizens.

Understanding what constitutes leadership within community can be challenging for practitioners to grasp. Although consensus amongst scholars notes that leadership differs from management—the former more personal and transformational and the latter more professional and transactional (Hanold, 2015; Schweigert, 2007)—a single, clearly defined understanding of the term may not exist (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Hanold, 2015; Wheatley, 2009). In their work, *Learning as a Way of Leading*, Brookfield and Preskill (2009) propose that learning leadership, a style whereby leaders position learning at the centre of their practice, can be found amongst various models of leadership including transformational, symbiotic, developmental, servant, and organic leadership (pp. 6–15). Further developing this thought, Brookfield and Preskill consider both collective (pp. 83–104) and democratic (pp 149–170) approaches to

leadership—methodologies that exhibit characteristics of community development including the active participation of members and distributed power structures. Rather than focusing on one specific style in and of itself, examining the commonalities across various styles may provide greater value in understanding leadership.

The work of Schweigert (2007) helps to clarify leadership within a community context by identifying four essential elements: "access to power, support and accountability, effective community practices, and public work in the 'spaces between places'" (p. 334). In focusing less on individual efforts and more on what contributes to the best interests of a collective, Schweigert's perspective provides direction for appreciating leadership within community settings. Similarly, Margaret Wheatley's work with the Berkana Institute aims to support the development of new leaders. Structured upon the idea that leadership is not a position within a hierarchy which an individual obtains or holds, the Berkana Institute instead focuses on four areas of community: naming, connecting, resourcing, and telling their stories (in Madsen & Hammond, 2005). Just as Coady (1939), Kretzman and McKnight (1993), and Mathie and Cunningham (2008) believe, Wheatley stresses that if leadership is spoken about in terms of a collective mindset rather than focusing on developing individual leaders, there is an increased likelihood of a community realizing its full potential (in Madsen & Hammond, 2005). Brookfield and Preskill (2009) build upon this belief by noting that the concept of leadership is a collective process, one which relies upon the relationships between individuals and groups. Schweigert adds to this perspective in suggesting that, "[i]n communities, the essential dynamics and characteristics of leadership appear more clearly in relational patterns of thinking, acting, and responding" (p. 326). Perhaps adopting Wheatley's perspective on leadership may be most appropriate for community purposes:

[A] leader is anyone who wants to help and, more specifically, anyone who initiates

action to help. It's anyone who sees something that needs to be changed in their world

and then is willing to step forward to do something. … The real act of leadership is that

you notice something that needs to be changed and then have enough courage to step

forward and make something happen. (in Madsen & Hammond, 2005, p. 74)

Understanding leadership within community settings may be best predicated on the idea that

every individual has the potential to become a likely leader. As Schweigert (2007) attests,

leadership can be found "dispersed throughout the community, among leaders and followers" (p.

328). Perhaps it is possible that most people, regardless of their role or how they choose to lead,

have the essential characteristics of leadership inherently inside of them (Coady, 1939; Madsen

& Hammond, 2005).

Building upon the idea that any community member may be a leader, Delaney (2010)

considers likely leaders to be individuals who "think critically about community issues and have

the desire to create community change" (p. 66) and who no longer see themselves as Objects but

rather as Subjects in society (Freire, 1970). This is an important distinction as action taken by

someone who simply imagines they have power is neither sustainable nor fulfilling in the process

of self or community liberation (Freire, 1970). However, some leaders choose to lead through

less visible efforts. Skerratt and Steiner (2013) note that while some citizens may take public

leadership roles, others select non-participation as a legitimate way to lead, selecting to invest

their time and energy in roles out of the public view or those not traditionally considered

positions of leadership. The choice to not engage in public leadership roles is made from a

position of power and should not be ignored or negated as a sign of weakness. Additionally,

Skerratt and Steiner caution that "the engagement of key individuals or community leaders might

not only be insufficient but destructive. It is likely that certain structures of power or 'partial empowerment' disempowers communities as a whole" (p. 331). Practitioners and existing leaders should remain aware of potential consequences that can arise as new leaders are identified and fostered.

While leaders do play a role in coordinating and directing others, they should remain cautious and intentional in their efforts; educators too should be mindful of the leadership roles they assume in learning environments (see the previous section on the Role of Educators). Established community leaders should be careful as to not impose their thoughts, words, or opinions on others as this would "invalidate their own praxis" (Freire, 1970, p. 126). The role of what Freire (1970) calls a "revolutionary leader" (pp. 69, 95)—to support learners and citizens to build the capacity that exists within them—is echoed in the work from both Coady (1939) and McKee (2014). Given many social and cultural groups may be underrepresented in, or have limited access to, governance structures across North America, attention and deliberate effort should be given to seek out, to foster, and to promote potential leaders from such groups (Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Providing leadership opportunities to disadvantaged groups can have an empowering effect on individuals and the collectives they lead, and would provide a diversity of perspectives that may be key to identifying effective, creative solutions to problems which communities face (Boeren, 2011; Peeters et al., 2014; Prins & Drayton, 2010).

Within community settings, effective leaders are likely to be "of the place" rather than outsiders (Mathie & Gaventa, 2015, p. 13). Freire (1970) identifies this as an important distinction when he suggests that leaders "must avoid organizing themselves apart from the people" (Freire, 1970, p. 182). Individuals motivated by personal experience often self-identify

as leaders, which displays a sense of mastery (Delaney, 2010; Madsen & Hammond, 2005; Schweigert, 2007). In self-identifying as leaders, citizens exemplify self-empowerment, a characteristic that can transfer to other individuals within their networks—helping to generate a collective ability to create change amongst larger local communities (Delaney, 2010). Given the connection between leadership in community settings and the importance of location, developing an awareness of the differing perspectives on place can inform an understanding of why some citizens feel connected to specific communities and assume localized leadership roles.

Place

In *The Production of Space,* Lefebvre (1991) suggests "that every society, every culture, every place has its own spatial practice" (Foroughi & Durant, 2013, p. 222), and that "space is a product filled with living politics and ideologies" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 628). Since the contributions of this seminal work, public and academic communities have paid close attention to how place influences individuals, learning experiences, and community (Bridger & Alter, 2006). As understanding place and space can present challenges, it is important for educators and practitioners to consider broad perspectives on these complex concepts. Establishing a wider appreciation of what constitutes place can alter how learning environments are understood, where they develop, and the value they provide to a community.

Place and Space. Terminology such as place and space can be confusing. Interchangeable language—place, space, social space, community etc.—can create inconsistencies in understanding (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012) and lead to questions such as the one Nesbit and Wilson (2010) raise: "What Is Place?" (p. 391). Although scholars agree that place differs from space, what creates this difference is unclear. For many scholars, "the production of

space," as Lefebvre (1991) succinctly phrased it, acts as a point of origin for understanding the spatial concept of place. In building upon Lefebvre's work, Grunewald (2003) offers that "space is the medium through which culture is reproduced" (p. 629). Evaluating this notion against a place-conscious approach to education, Grunewald identifies that it is place which is associated with cultural space, compared to space which can be more arithmetically defined and potentially void of meaning. Other scholars similarly consider place as more than just a mathematical equation, with some identifying it as a social space (Bridger & Alter, 2006; Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Lefebvre, 1991; Nesbit & Wilson, 2010)—"a location endowed with meaning" (Johnson, 2012, p. 830) or a site of power relations (Gaventa, 2006).

One of the roles that citizens can play is that of place maker (Gruenewald, 2003; Johnson, 2012). This is a term that no longer focuses on formal city building roles but rather on how individuals feel connected to space (Bridger & Alter, 2006). The personal connections that individuals have with the various levels of community they belong to support an understanding that spaces are shaped by the people who occupy them (Bradshaw, 2008; Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Johnson, 2012). Recognizing experiences themselves as sites of learning leads way to appreciating that our relationships with space may be a form of learning in and of itself (Freire, 1970; Gruenewald, 2003; hooks, 1994). With that said, the discussion of whether meaning is prescribed or ascribed is as contentious of an issue as the divide between place and space itself. Beginning with the individual (Bradshaw, 2008; Bridger & Alter, 2006; Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Gaventa, 2006; Kudryavtsev et al., 2012), or the place (Gruenewald, 2003; Johnson, 2012), how—and from where—meaning is produced in relation to place is a topic regularly examined by scholars.

Regardless, place matters, even in post-place communities—those of both a physical and digital nature where "the essential characteristics of community are the social relations (solidarity or bonds) between people" (Bradshaw, 2008, p. 6). However, as Nesbit and Wilson (2010) remind us, "Western understandings of place and space, which stipulate them as Cartesian or Euclidean constructs, are too restrictive for understanding their role in educational settings" (p. 391). As such, scholars are focusing their attention on identifying differing perspectives of place grounded in cultural, ecological, and social traditions.

Perspectives on Place. As social dynamics continue to evolve, it has become increasingly important to consider how cultural representations of place support an understanding of such a complex concept (Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003). Considering diverse perspectives on place is important to educators because learning is inseparable from the cultural and social contexts it takes place within (Gruenewald, 2003; Nesbit & Wilson, 2010). Johnson (2012) stresses that attention should be paid to the "significant cultural histories" that may be missing from understandings of place and begins to address this lack of knowledge by connecting Indigenous understandings of place to a sense of "placelessness" within Western society (pp. 830–831). Gruenewald (2003) too calls for Indigenous traditions to be considered when analyzing the power of place. By encouraging scholars to identify cultural perspectives for a more informed approach to place-based education, Gruenewald may help to develop greater awareness of how groups identify and find belonging in relation to place. As identified by Foroughi and Durant (2013), without diverse perspectives on place, inaccessible interpretations of spaces can exclude certain populations from participating and engaging.

Through a multidisciplinary framework, Gruenewald (2003) considers perspectives of place rooted in bioregional thinking, ecofeminist understandings, and natural histories in addition to those of Indigenous origins (pp. 634–635). Connecting these perspectives to place-based education, Kudryavtsev, Stedman, and Krasny (2012) emphasize the role that sense of place plays in environmental education. Motivated to protect the places which are meaningful to them, "it is possible that some cultural, social, and other place meanings do impact the ways people influence their places and more broadly their environment" (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012, p. 241). These perspectives provide a necessary balance to more traditional views of place rooted primarily in spatial concepts and void of greater meaning or cultural connections.

For many scholars, a social perspective on place is often at the forefront of their contributions. Meshram and O'Cass (2013) note the power of place for the purposes of empowerment and reducing isolation, with Bridger and Alter (2006) emphasizing the creation and dissemination of social capital. The work of English and Mayo (2012) is consistent with that of Foroughi and Durant (2013) in considering place for community development purposes. Conversely, Bradshaw (2008) seems to be conflicted when considering a social perspective of place. Bradshaw notes that "place, e.g., the spatial location of residence, needs to be decoupled from the essential characteristics of community—the social relations that bond people" (p. 5), further supporting his argument for communities that are not tied to place. However, Bradshaw then suggests that "something is lost in places that are not also communities, especially collective action and bonding social capital" (p. 8). This complex understanding of place—from a Western perspective—illustrates why cultural, Indigenous, and ecological perspectives are essential to developing a more holistic, robust, and informed understanding of place.

As Gruenewald (2003) reminds us, "[w]hat we know is, in large part, shaped by the kinds of places we experience and the quality of attention we give them" (p. 645). Collecting assorted perspectives on place can build a broader appreciation for where individuals learn, how citizens engage, and whom is fostered into leadership roles. Understanding where learning manifests itself can change how it is perceived and experienced.

Sites of Learning. The sites where adult learning occurs within community are increasingly being studied though there is still a need to broaden an understanding of such spaces (Chang, 2014). As scholars share their perceptions of the traditional, social, and experiential learning found "deliberatively and consciously integrated into [locations of] community development" (English & Mayo, 2012, p. 136), the notion that "places are profoundly pedagogical" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621) becomes more apparent.

Social spaces, created by adult education programs, are important for building community, for cultivating relationships of trust, and for providing citizens with an opportunity to be empowered. Pioneering examples of such spaces include the Highlander Research and Education Centre—an organization that uses popular education, participatory research, and cultural work to develop community leaders (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009)—and the Extension Department at St. Francis Xavier University, which mobilizes people based on their interests and abilities to create change (Coady, 1939). These organizations help to illustrate Chang's (2014) important observation that "[e]very social unit in a community can be an adult education site" (p. 110). Further to Chang's point, spaces which foster dialogical processes (Delaney, 2010; Shor, 1992) include cultural and religious institutions (Chang, 2014; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993) which establish places where people can unite around common ideas (Gouthro, 2010). Providing such spaces—where people can come together—creates opportunity for individuals to learn from

each other's wisdom (Meshram & O'Cass, 2013; Shor, 1992), and it makes popular education techniques accessible to the public (English & Mayo, 2012).

Given the relationship between locations and learning, it is important to clearly structure learning expectations for individuals within specific environments. However, Gore (1990) suggests that there may be limitations within some environments to fully empower students, with Shor (1992) adding that some sites of learning can be disempowering. As some sites are more accessible than others, due to gender, social status, or cultural background, it is important to provide learning environments for diverse populations (Boeren, 2011; Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Mackean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Peeters et al., 2014; Prins & Drayton, 2010). Chang (2014), Lindeman (1982), McKee (2014), and Shor (1992) consider the value in approaching learning through a situated model, a methodology which begins with the experiences of learners themselves and has the potential to transform every site—space or place—into one of learning. When learning is tailored to the needs and circumstance of specific learners, it becomes more accessible, effective, and empowering at the same time (McKee, 2014). hooks (1994) takes this idea further by suggesting that the traditional school classroom may no longer be the only place where one's self can be reinvented through learning, asserting that when students focus on developing a praxis, the act of reflecting or theorizing itself is likely to become a site of learning. Conceptualizing sites of learning in this way, beyond physical characteristics, has the potential to transform where, when, and how adults learn.

Where we learn may be as important as is what we learn; because of this, care needs to be taken as to not lose connection with our places—in learning and in community. As Gruenewald (2003) reminds us, "[e]ducational disregard for places, therefore, limits the possibilities for democracy (and for places) because it diverts the attention of citizens, educators, and students

from the social, cultural, and political patterns involved in place making" (p. 626). Developing a more thorough appreciation for the connections between place, community, and adult education can be liberating. Understanding such connections may help scholars and practitioners to better understand the power structures embedded within society, the relationships of trust critical to promoting individual livelihood, and the importance of building bonds with one's community.

Summary of the Literature

In reviewing literature related to informal learning, community development, and place, three themes consistently presented themselves across these areas of study. In understanding power and empowerment, social capital, and the relationship between individuals and collectives, a richer appreciation can be formed regarding how adult education and community development are interconnected with place. Recognizing how these themes relate to one another has the potential to inform both professional practice and future scholarly work.

Power and Empowerment. Power and empowerment are important themes for educators and practitioners to understand because they influence how learners and citizens are engaged with. Power may be understood in terms of a zero-sum scenario whereby it is a finite resource to be given and taken in the balancing of an imaginary set of scales, or it can be seen as a much more dynamic element that can be created, used, and shared by individuals, collectives, and organizations of authority (Gaventa, 2006; Gore, 1990). Gore (1990) suggests that the term empowerment may have no single specific meaning, for it is only when words are used in a given context that meaning can be ascribed. Given the ambiguous nature of empowerment, Nesbit and Wilson (2010) suggest considering any number of theoretical perspectives to help overcome the challenges of comprehending it.

Individuals, communities, and practitioners should be aware of the creation and distribution of power across all facets of life. "Agent[s] of Empowerment" (Gore, 1990, p. 8)—those who give or enable authority—exist in partnerships across different levels of government (Bradshaw, 2008; English & Mayo, 2012; Gaventa, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2005; Mathie & Gaventa, 2015; Prins & Drayton, 2010), within educator/learner relationships (Freire, 1970; Gore, 1990; Prins & Drayton, 2010; Shaw & Crowther, 2014), and are embedded into established cultural histories (Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Freire, 1970; Gruenewald, 2003; hooks, 1994; Johnson, 2012). Given that such complexities exist, Nesbit and Wilson (2010) suggest that scholars and practitioners consider mapping these "geographies of power" (p. 394) as one instrument towards forming a better understanding of power relations. Gaventa (2006) proposes the Power Cube as another framework for deciphering power. To help in realizing why and how we engage, the Power Cube considers the different types of power—over, to, within, and with—while focusing on the relationship between the levels, forms, and spaces it occupies. Previous to Gaventa's contribution, Freire (1970) identified closed and invited spaces while Gruenewald (2003) described the division between public and private spaces; these two additional perspectives help to shape an understanding of how power is manifested and perceived. Since the initial idea of the Power Cube, Foroughi and Durant (2013) and Mathie et al. (2017) have followed Gaventa's work in considering both learning and community development within diverse urban settings.

Regardless of how power presents itself, it is important to recognize that it is entrenched into the spaces and relationships it helps to create and shape. It can be challenging to fully recognize the social relations which exist in education and community without due regard for the underlying distribution of power. Examining the essence of social capital, and the different types

of relationships it fosters, can help provide a better sense of the dynamics of power between individuals, groups, and the organizations they engage with.

      Social Capital. Both community and learning environments create the necessary space for dialogue, enabling people to build mutual relationships through social sharing and collective action (Westoby & Shevellar, 2016). Such relationships can be given meaning and understood more comprehensively when viewed though a social capital lens. According to Meshram and O'Cass (2013), social capital is a "resource made available to a group or community; which enables them to address and resolve problems they face in common" (p. 149) while Bridger and Alter (2006) suggest that "social capital is a resource that facilitates action—and that action can be positive or negative" (p. 7, emphasis added). Relationships founded on bonding and bridging social capital—within one's immediate existing networks and those beyond close knit connections, respectively—can generate different types of connections among community members (Bradshaw, 2008; Bridger & Alter, 2006). Understanding these two forms of social capital may help to inform why relationships cultivated within certain communities resonate more with individuals and can have a greater impact on their personal wellbeing, than others. As a growing number of personal interactions stretch beyond the confines of place, understanding how individuals build and sustain connections across their networks becomes increasingly important for the purposes of both individual learning and the strengthening of communities (Bradshaw, 2008; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2008; McKee, 2014). Recognizing the differences between these two forms of social capital has the potential to explain the social foundations of education, community, and place.

      Taking a social capital perspective when considering the relationships across educational and community settings is not without problems. Bridger and Alter (2006) caution that a social

capital approach for community development purposes may not be effective if a given location lacks a history of civic engagement or if deep social divisions are present. When considering smaller geographic communities, for instance those in rural North America, Skerratt and Steiner (2013) warn that assuming social capital generates inclusive civic harmony amongst residents fails to recognize power structures and inequities that can significantly impact such a place. Recognizing this, a consideration of various theoretical frameworks can help to evaluate the usefulness of a social capital perspective for adult learning and community development purposes (Gaventa, 2006; Nesbit & Wilson, 2010).

Even with its limits, a social capital perspective can prove to be an invaluable tool in understanding the interactions between individuals and collectives. As social networks function as a primary avenue for increasing one's social capital, it is important to recognize that they can also contribute to building a sense of belonging with others in the same community (McKee, 2014). In unpacking the social foundations of collectives, it can be, as Bridger and Alter (2006) suggest, easier to understand why "the essence of community is solidarity" (p. 9).

Individuals and Collectives. In *Masters of Their Own Destiny,* Coady (1939) proclaims that, "group action is coming," indicating an "evolution from individualism to some forms of collectivism" (p. 27). This shift, towards a collective mindset, identifies the scalability and flexibility of community when understood through the defining characteristic of solidarity (Bradshaw, 2008). In shifting focus from the individual to a collective, in both learning and community, the strength in the social relationships which bind people together becomes more apparent.

When individuals see themselves as part of a larger collective, they can begin to develop a sense of belonging and take greater responsibility for the group. hooks (1994) suggests that

members who share a mutual responsibility for the development of a community offer more constructive input to further its growth. Such a communal bond can act as a catalyst for others in a group based on the achievements of an individual. Delaney (2010), Gouthro (2010), and Mathie and Cunningham (2008) all agree that when one person in a community feels empowered and achieves realization of their full potential, the collective they belong to often shares in similar successes. As people come together, their individual experiences and the support they give one another can inform collective decisions and improve community life as a result. Delaney suggest that since individual experiences help to shape collective decisions, as well as the inverse, it is important that close connections remain between individuals and their larger community. Furthermore, MacKee (2014) notes that as individuals develop into agents of change, a need arises for them to remain within the community of origin, which fostered their development, "to build and help maintain momentum" (p. 108).

In considering what is best for a collective, there still is a need to focus on the individual, although doing so should occur with caution. Shor (1992) proposes that teaching self-reliance is a form of individualism, which can result in blame being transferred to individuals while being removed from the larger systems they exist within. Moving away from the notion of competitive self-reliance, which Shor suggest is disempowering, consideration should be given to an individual's role within a larger group or society. Similarly, Freire (1970) suggests local communities are to be studied "as totalities in themselves and as part of another totality" (p. 142); such an approach can be helpful when applied to individuals in relation to collectives.

In understanding the relationship between individuals and collectives, the social capital which binds them, and the underlying power structures found throughout all facets of society, a more informed appreciation of the connections between informal learning, community

development, and place can be realized. Although the literature reviewed here provides a foundation of knowledge towards illustrating this point, it is not without gaps.

Theoretical Gaps

This review of existing literature considers and evaluates existing scholarly work across the areas of adult education, community development, and place to help inform the intentions of this research, and to shape the questions which guide it. While identifying common themes, critiques, and debates across these areas of study, a series of theoretical gaps surfaced. First, research related to informal learning appears underrepresented across scholarly literature in comparison to formal and nonformal learning. Given how ubiquitous and important informal learning is, it may deserve greater academic attention and recognition (Boeren, 2011; Mackean & Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Peeters et al., 2014). Additionally, research that connects informal learning to learners' epistemological beliefs, and that focuses on leveraging individuals' networks for the purposes of reflection, are areas suited for increased study (Peeters et al., 2014).

Next, a greater focus could be directed towards understanding how adult education and community development collectively foster citizenship and community leadership. Although adult education has a history of being closely connected to community development, the link between the two for fostering community leadership could be more apparent. Gouthro (2010) attests that "there have been few empirical studies conducted on adult learning experiences around citizenship within the Canadian context" (p. 10). Furthermore, as traditional understandings of leadership disappear or are adapted, a need presents itself to better explain leadership within community contexts while identifying how it can be effectively fostered (Hanold, 2015; Madsen & Hammond, 2005; Wheatley, 2009). While Delaney (2010), Gouthro (2010), and Schweigert (2007) share concerns regarding the need for individuals to balance their

personal ambitions with the goals of the communities they lead, little is offered in terms of how this balance can be practically achieved or the role of adult education in the process. Although Schweigert (2007) and Wheatley (2009) speak of community leadership, and Freire (1970), Delaney (2010), and Knowles et al. (2005) note the role practitioners play in fostering new leaders, most scholars reviewed have not concentrated on how the process of adult education can be focused to foster community leaders. It appears that an opportunity exists to more closely connect the places and processes of adult learning to community development for the purposes of fostering leadership.

Lastly, as an area exhaustively reviewed on its own, place has not received the attention it deserves within adult education research. Gruenewald (2003) clearly identifies a gap between place and education:

> Although educational research and practice often suggest the benefits of building "learning communities" and connecting learning to "real life," the significance of the relationship between education and local space remains undertheorized and underdeveloped. (p. 642)

Typically considered only as a container in which educational activities unfold, the value place offers "as an enabler or producer of difference and power relations" has yet to be a focus of regular study (Nesbit & Wilson, 2010, p. 395). Furthermore, for the significant role it plays in the development of community, research has neglected to connect spatial elements to adult education for community-based action (Foroughi & Durant, 2013). Even with the contributions from Gaventa (2006), which considers place in terms of the distribution of power, these gaps identify an opportunity for future research to adequately consider the value of place for education and for community related purposes.

Chapter 3: Methods of Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation

In an attempt to fill the theoretical gaps identified while reviewing the aforementioned literature, this research moved slowly from "organization to meaning" (Glesne, 2006, p. 164) following Wolcott's (1994) three means of data transformation: description—constructing the reflections to provide a characterization of the periods; analysis—employing Lichtman's (2013) process of coding and categorization to identify the significant findings; and interpretation—situating findings within the context of culture and existing scholarly literature. Following this structured process facilitated a thorough discussion of findings and aided in highlighting emerging themes. Data analysis commenced after all reflections were created. Although Glesne (2006), Lichtman, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) all suggest that the collection—or creation—and analysis of data should happen concurrently, I opted to separate these two parts of the process. Given the structure of my methods, I wanted to treat all data creation equally as to remove any avoidable bias that could form when analyzing earlier data before all data creation was finished. To isolate the processes of data creation and analysis, I began coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data once all reflections were drafted.

Autobiographical Reconstruction

Building upon my positionality as a community leader, I focused auto-ethnographic research activities on three distinct periods of my life between 2007 and 2017. These periods were identified as significant from the work I collected and synthesized for my professional portfolio (Van Lierop, 2017). The following outlines the periods which formed the basis for an autobiographical reconstruction and the creation of auto-ethnographic accounts:

- **2007–2011. Civic Activist** – a period where I completed ad-hoc work, which resonated with myself as an individual, while being a member of place-based communities

- **2011–2014. Formal Leader** – a period characterized by formal leadership roles, both paid and un-paid, with a selection of not-for-profit organizations

- **2014–2017. Non-Leader** – a period where I removed myself from community-based roles, focusing inward to develop a leadership practice rooted in intentionality

For each period, I completed three critical reflections, one representing each of the following categories: snapshots, artifacts, and metaphor (Muncey, 2005). The items selected to reflect upon were identified as I completed an autobiographical reconstruction based upon both my professional portfolio and a personal archive containing documents, artifacts, and imagery. The details of each category are as follows:

- **Artifacts** – document analysis was conducted on select journal entries and other artifacts, collected over a 10-year period

- **Snapshots** – photo elicitation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 170) of images selected from a personal collection of over a million images created

- **Metaphor** – a re-consideration of the phrase, "places called home" (Massey, 1994)—a concept I have returned to throughout my career, both in writing and practice

To help focus my attention while reflecting, individual panels were created for each period examined. A given panel collected the elements selected from the above categories in one location to catalyze centered thinking around the experiences from a specific period while drafting reflections (see Appendix A for all three reflection panels).

Guiding Questions for Reflection. I was cognizant of the need to deepen the narrative within each reflection to avoid shallow imagery (Bolton, 2014) and to draw out the "thick descriptions" typical of an auto-ethnography (Geertz, 1973). To aid in uncovering the essence of my learning during these periods—from understanding the influence that culture, society, and politics had on my development as a leader to recognizing in what ways these experiences were shaped by place—I drew from Mitchell and Coltrinari's (2001) questions for reflective writing. Questions were selected based on their likelihood to aid in crafting reflections that were descriptive, that were informed by place-based concepts, and that contained enough depth in their content to be useful for analysis and interpretation (see Appendix B for the guiding questions used). Research

Results and their Display. The result of the research methods outlined were nine reflections across all periods, categories, and elements of focus. The collective total of all reflections numbered roughly 100 pages of single-spaced, typed written notes based on the guiding questions. Given the personal nature of reflection, and to respect my privacy as the subject, the entirety of the reflections is not included within this report. Selected text extracts are included for illustrative purposes throughout. For easily identification, these `text extracts are always displayed as mono case italic type.`

Coding and Categorization

Data was coded, categorized, and grouped into concepts following Lichtman's (2013) 6-step process (pp. 251–255). This process of coding and categorization was completed manually. What follows are the details of the steps taken.

Step 1. Initial coding – to move "from responses to summary ideas" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 252), the questions which guide this research were used as initial codes to help organize the written reflections. **Step 2. Revisiting initial coding** – each piece of coded text was titled with a summary of the content. Each item was then assigned a numerical value, between 0 and 3, to weigh its perceived importance compared to other items with the same code. This weighting was to help identify important statements and emerging themes. These weights were subjective; they were based on my understanding of academic concepts and in recognizing emerging patterns among my experiences.

It is important to note that steps 3 through 6, outlined below, were each completed twice: once for items coded within each period of study, to provide an understanding of the significant findings, and again for items coded to each research question, to highlight emerging themes. This dual approach provided the foundation for a comprehensive examination of the data to ensure that the emerging themes reflected the findings extracted from the raw data.

Step 3. Initial listing of categories – items that were perceived to be of greater importance, those with higher weightings, were then grouped under headings which represented broad categories as identified by the summary text. **Step 4. Modifying the initial list** – once the initial list of categories was identified, items weighted as less-important were re-examined to pinpoint additional pieces of data which supported the identified categories and to recognize any other significant categories that seemed to be representative of the data that were not initially considered. **Step 5. Revisiting categories** – all categories were then reconsidered: combining those that were similar, including the creation of sub-categories, splitting complex ideas into multiple areas, and eliminating categories that appeared less significant. **Step 6. From categories to concepts** – the categories for each period of study were mapped to a matrix and

compared side-by-side to draw connections across the periods, to highlight similarities and differences between the periods, and to identify specific characteristics of each period. A similar matrix was created to map all of the categories in relation to the research questions. This helped to build an understanding of what findings may answer each question, and to identify the larger themes which emerged.

Theoretical Framework

Information derived from the raw data, through the process of coding and categorization, was interpreted in the context of culture and existing scholarly literature. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning was consulted as a means to situate this work amongst broader scholarly discourse. In recognizing the informal learning that happens as part of experiential learning, and the importance of reflection after the fact, I relied on key adult education concepts including those from Lindeman (1982), Bolton (2014) and Schön (1983) to codify the creation and analysis of the research data. The theories provided by these scholars are relevant as they directly align with the selected methodology of auto-ethnography. Literature related to community development, place, and leadership were also considered to stimulate adult education concepts within the community development landscape.

Trustworthiness

Undertaking an auto-ethnography required myself to be vulnerable, honest, and intentional in the practice of self-reflection. Given the personal nature of the auto-ethnographic processes, it was essential for me to take steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. To establish reliability—my credibility as a narrator; validity—to evoke a lifelike feeling within readers; generalizability—to make my shared experiences accessible to the reader (Ellis, Adams,

& Bochner, 2011, p. 282); and to ensure that my recollections were not out of touch with the social, political, and cultural contexts of the day, I used the following strategies. First, I respected the framework for critical reflection previously outlined, guided by the questions I drew from the work of Mitchell and Coltrinari (2001). Second, I engaged a colleague, a current Master of Adult Education student, to act as an external reviewer. This reviewer examined a summary of the reflections to help identify any misunderstandings or exclusions of essential elements, and to highlight bias. Third, I consulted with a critical friend, a Faculty Member at Fanshawe College—my current place of employment—to provide direction in terms of writing critically and meeting the objectives of graduate studies. Lastly, to distinguish between my story and an auto-ethnographic account, I consulted the relevant literature as "required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 276).

Ethical Considerations

Although undertaking an auto-ethnography positions myself at the centre of the research as the primary subject, I am not absolved from considering the ethical implications of my work. Given that auto-ethnographic accounts are based on experiences rooted in relationships (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016), I was aware of the potential for other individuals to be implicated in self-narrative accounts either as active participants or background characters (Ellis et al., 2011; Tullis, 2016). In considering the "relational ethics" (Ellis, 2007, p. 281) found throughout auto-ethnographies, it was necessary for me to be cognizant in my selection of critical incidents and the methods by which I chose to reflect upon them, as to limit the exposure of individuals who influenced such experiences. Comments regarding any individuals other than myself were made in such way to retain their anonymity. Mentions of anonymous individuals were included only to provide contextual information for the initial capture of critical incidents

and are not included within this report. The goal of this research is to focus on my own experiences as the primary source of data, not the experiences of others.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Data & Findings

The following sections summarize the data generated while writing nine auto-ethnographic reflections. First, each period of professional practice is characterized, including comments on my actions, thought process, and motivations along with the meaning I assigned to my work, learning, and interactions with place. Then, the significant findings which emerged across the periods examined are highlighted, collated under topics like these: learning through experiences, reflecting on/in action, valuing relationships, developing as a leader, and understanding place.

Characterization of Periods

The focal points for this auto-ethnography are three distinct periods of professional practice between 2007 and 2017, as identified from an archive of work. Each period contains roles of responsibility, actions taken, and products of work which share similar characteristics of a given leadership style or type of role. The sections which follow characterize the following periods: 2007–2011- Civic Activist; 2011–2014 - Formal Leader; 2014–2017 - Non-Leader.

2007–2011. Civic Activist. This period represents my initial introduction into community development efforts and leadership roles. In 2007, I moved from a neighbourhood where I felt little connection to community, or a sense of place, to one embedded in the heart of the city where I was surrounded by community building activities. After moving, I found myself completing various projects as a means to explore my creativity and skills. These projects

centered on industries or activities that I had little knowledge of but some interest in, many of which aligned with community building initiatives. The most notable of this work was titled, Fifty-Two Weeks, a project whereby I explored my skills and creativity through a series of week-long creative endeavours:

> When I came up with the notion of Fifty-Two Weeks I was in a place that I needed to get out of. I was as far away from creativity as I had ever been. Somewhere along the way I lost my creativity that I cherished so much as a child and I was in desperate need to find it.

Actions taken during this period, primarily as part of Fifty-Two Weeks, were primarily self-motivated and could be characterized as both highly individualized and narrow in focus. Often ignorant of external influences, the work I completed was selfish in nature in comparison to traditional community development efforts. I had yet to develop and mature my skills to *"understand the full value in accepting the points of views of others."* Viewing the city as a community but only considering the input of myself—a membership of one—the efforts I made were based on my own interests and individual gain. I was driven by selfishness and self-centred motivation rather than anything else:

> I questioned whether others cared as much as I did about the city and the experiences which make up its essence as I did. ... I began to reconsider the project in terms of what it meant to me ... I wasn't interested in the thoughts of those not engaged.

On the surface, my actions appeared to have community at the core of their purpose. However, the driving force behind my work was a personal need to take actions with short-term rewards

and personal gains. I struggled to identify purpose in both my work and life. Because of this, I was looking to boost my ego and build a stronger sense of self-esteem though my work. Looking back, it is clear to me that I was searching for a sense of belonging and a connection to community:

> *I was hoping to better understand my appreciation for, and connection to these places. The meaning I assigned to projects was directly connected to my personal conditions, perspective on where I lived, and need to learn more about my individualized experiences. I assumed that this meaning and how I assigned it would have been similar to others.*

Of particular interest is that my primary mode to connect with others was not in-person, but through digital means using the social media platform, Twitter. Sharing my contributions and work, and engaging with others to gather what feedback I could, Twitter offered a way to connect with others while requiring less commitment and face-to-face interactions:

> *As I was changing how I used Twitter, it changed me as a person. I became less introverted. I started to engage with people more, overcame many of my fears and anxieties and became part of a community that I felt was trying to improve the very place I called home. ... Perhaps the most important influence Twitter had over me as a person was how well it facilitated the building of physical connections that simply began as digital ones.*

Engaging with others in this manner, initially through digital means, allowed me to retain most of the individuality and anonymity in my efforts while at the same time providing some sense of belonging. Over time, the individuals I connected with online eventually gathered in-person and provided an initial entry point into conversations about city and community building.

2011–2014. Formal Leader. This period of practice had me directing, managing, and leading both organizations and projects within the field of community development. In some cases, I was working independently and was responsible to a governing board of directors while other times, I was engaged as part of a team of colleagues completing contracted work. The roles I assumed during this time were both management and leadership related, although not always at the same time. Given that I had greater day-to-day connection to others during this period, compared to my time as a Civic Activist, my reflections placed greater emphasis on my contributions as part of a collective:

> *In previous experiences ... I was primarily working on my own and not with a close network/community. ... Having not had the experiences previously, to understand the relationship between an individual and a larger collective—led me to not recognizing how to balance the input of everyone while managing common expectations, contributing to me valuing this type of learning more.*

During this period, my appreciation for the differences between management and leadership began to develop due to the roles and reporting structures I worked within:

> *I quickly learned that the words management and leadership were not the same, nor did the definitions that people held in their minds regarding these terms, or the actions they took which conveyed these ideas, necessarily align with my understandings or expectations.*

I began to better understand the type of leadership I most valued was centered around "*...competency, trust, and respect.*" I began reflecting on the types of actions which individuals could take to effectively lead others, such as "*placing others before myself—most of the time.*" With these understandings came challenges:

More often than not, I found myself in conflict with those I was tasked to work with. My 'colleagues' often thought that they had supreme power over my actions. I felt that my actions were my responsibility to meet the goals outlined for me. Whether or not those I was working for felt I was capable of achieving my goals was never directly addressed—I only felt as if I was never provided the opportunity to complete my work in a manner that I saw fit.

I often found myself in conflict between believing leadership entailed one set of qualities and being asked to exhibit others. I found myself working with leaders who did not lead in ways which reflected my understanding and appreciation of the term. This was an ongoing challenge for myself, one that I struggled with throughout the period, noting that *"not having complete control over my work, the autonomy for me to work the way I work best, was challenging in many situations."* The result of this feeling was an initial decreased level of engagement on my part:

I stopped focusing on developing my professional skills as they related to the specific work I was tasked with completing, and the relationship building which was essential to delivering on the types of things I was working on suffered as a result.

This feeling, and sense of dis-engagement, was followed by an increased realization of the personal duty that an individual has to tend to their own learning:

One of the results of addressing different definitions of leadership was needing to take greater ownership of my development, and responsibility for both my actions and their results. Although my learning wasn't necessarily controlled by others during this time, I often told myself it was. The

structure and bureaucracy of these organizations, which is difficult to
avoid, was an easy scapegoat to avoid taking responsibility for my learning.

Disappointed with the level of support provided by those I reported to, and the learning opportunities connected to my specific roles, I often felt that I was left alone to identify the actions which would support my growth. Recognizing that an individual's evolution is wholly their responsibility, and that self-directed learning resonated more with me than learning directed by others, I started to "*believe that we have a personal responsibility to ourselves to invest in making our lives the best possible version of itself, for our self-betterment and the betterment of those around us.*"

2014–2017. Non-Leader. As I transitioned into this period, I started to realize how important it is for an individual to dedicate the time, energy, and resources to developing their self and their practice. My time as a Non-Leader was focused on personal development and clarifying my skills and purpose. This focus was intentional to help improve my wellbeing, and to better understand what I value, while strengthening my practice in the process. In removing myself from formal community commitments, and from many relationships, my goal was to "*better understand the gifts that I had to offer, the needs that were present, and where I should be investing my time and energy.*" Taking this action offered the necessary time and space to focus on my practice; however, it created associated challenges that I did not initially anticipate.

Having invested much of my energy over the past two periods into communities, organizations, and projects, it became apparent during this time of withdraw how much neglect I had shown for myself, my practice, and my overall wellbeing:

For the better part of a decade I had been go-go-go, spending time volunteering for anything I could get my hands on. I kept myself as busy as possible and as a result I: ended up neglecting myself and the self-care required; sabotaging personal relationships which should have been a priority after taking care of myself; lacked direction when it came to identifying my interests and skills.

I began to appreciate what skills and emotions were deficient within myself, "*that I can overcommit and lack the ability to prioritize what is most important,*" and started to identify strategies to help improve them: "*to slow down and start to focus on myself, to improve my day-to-day feelings and conditions.*" The result of such realizations was a better appreciation for what I had to offer the people and communities I serve. However, I lacked the needed connections, to community and individuals, to be able to serve. Having distanced myself from the spaces and people I had engaged with in the past, I found myself at a loss during this period. Such a realization led me to "*questioning the value of my accomplishments, being humbler than I should be, and downplaying the importance of the contributions I make*" and trying to identify places where I could find a sense of belonging within.

Spending time in Third Places—"the core settings of informal public life" (Oldenberg, 1999, p. 16)—a habit I first formed as a Civic Activist, allowed me to be surrounded by others without having a commitment to engage with them: "*coffee shops, parks, public events, and cultural institutions—these are the places that seem to have more of a meaning connected to them and are the places where the most interesting of learning experiences have found their genesis.*" Playing the role of participant rather than formal leader, I found myself observing more than speaking. This approach led to me building an appreciation for the things I missed most from being actively involved in communities. I started

to ponder relationships—"*the necessary social connections;*" resistance as a source of growth—"*easy doesn't build skill,*"; and the time necessary to focus on one's growth because "*a leader needs to attend to themselves before they can effectively attend to others.*"

Each period of professional practice was distinct from the others in that I approached the roles I had, and the work completed, based on a set of understandings about myself, the relationships I was engaged in, the leadership I encountered, and how I pursued learning opportunities. Any one of the periods, on their own, presented many opportunities to deepen my understanding of self and of practice. However, in considering all periods holistically, the findings which emerge present greater significance for understanding the learning experiences embedded within community efforts and how they impact leadership skill development.

Significant Findings

As the data from each of the three periods of professional practice was coded, categorized, interpreted, and analyzed, a number of significant findings were revealed. These findings existed not within a singular period but across all three. The findings included both similarities and differences found amongst the experiences captured. What follows is a summary of these findings which serves as a basis for a discussion and to identify the emerging themes.

Learning Through Experience. Understanding the difference between learning in pre-adults and that of adult learning—that a greater emphasis of responsibility is placed on the learner—is a realization I came to late in life. As a Civic Activist, I focused my learning on whatever work I was completing at the time and not necessarily on the learning that I needed the

most. Working to establish myself in the field of community development, I invested most of my effort for learning in activities that were ready made for, and easily accessible to, the field:

> *... my learning was not controlled by myself. When participating in professional development opportunities, or when working with/for institutions and organizations, the path of my professional learning was often not crafted by myself but directed by others.*

During this period, I believed that my learning and growth were the responsibility of others, and, as such, followed the paths provided to me by others. Ultimately, I had little interest, focus, or concern for taking ownership over my own learning. I recognized this, in noting, *"my actions and intentions lacked a certain level of intentionality,"* and *"I found myself less interested in what I was doing day-to-day, and more interested in just having something to do. ... I was never fully invested, engaged, or involved."* However, I never showed a significant level of interest for my own learning. My mindset and approach would change in the periods of practice which followed.

As both a Formal Leader and Non-Leader, I began to assume greater responsibility for my learning. I recognized that self-directed learning may be more effective and valuable to me than that which was directed or controlled by others. I acknowledged that I needed *"to make the honest effort to invest all of myself and my resources, or else the results will just end up being like everything else I do in life—half assed."* This realization did not align with reality, as the learning I was experiencing, related to my day-to-day work, was not necessarily where I felt I should be focusing my time:

> *When the reality set in—that the work, roles, and environments I was working in might not provide me the opportunities I was looking for, I found myself*

becoming less and less engaged with the work itself, and the learning

associated with it.

In coming to appreciate where I needed to invest my time, I also began to recognize that I should

carefully select which environments to situate myself within to support the type of individual

growth I aimed to achieve. I began to appreciate the value of place in the process of learning.

As I continued through periods of practice, it became clearer how context shapes learning

and growth. Having had spent most of my adult life within traditional educational environments,

the learning I participated in was most often within a classroom setting; such experiences lacked

the necessary context to give the learning meaning. As I left formal education systems, and

began to contribute in the workforce, it became apparent that learning related to my day-to-day

actions were more closely connected with me than that which was prescribed to me. This was

evident as both a Formal Leader and Non-Leader:

What I have come to understand though is that intention and meaning in

relation to learning, leadership, work, and professional growth his highly

contextual. ... Just as the most valuable of learning can come from an

individual's experiences, context is everything.

Although I did not realize it at the time, the comments, feedback, and

criticisms of those I was working with/for were highly contextual and not

necessarily representative of myself as a whole. ... I interpreted their

meaning and intentions within the context they were situated within and

translated that new information into knowledge about myself within that

specific space or environment.

Understanding context—roles, geographic communities, or dedicated office space—and the learning connected to a specific period in my life—low income, transition, or supporting others—sparked my curiosity, insomuch as I was interested in learning more about the things that were having a direct impact on my daily life. Part of what made certain experiences more engaging and valuable than others was how open I was to learn from them. As a Civic Activist, I often only engaged in activities that were relatively easy, that lacked significant conflict, and that I was comfortable with: "*the type of work and associated learning that didn't necessarily come easy to me, or that wasn't engaging to the level I needed it to be, was something I didn't continue to pursue for future work/learning.*" These experiences were, what I would classify as, safe. It was only when transitioning from being a Formal Leader into a Non-Leader that I started to realize that resistance offers opportunities for significant personal growth: "*The impact to my development as a leader has been that I never invested the time needed into myself, to grow, learn, and be challenged through these difficult situations.*" Experiences that were full of tension, difficult decisions, and inherent challenges offered the greatest potential for learning and growth. "*Easy does not build skill,*" was a term I returned to time and time again. Driving an openness to new experiences was the acceptance of myself, recognition of my core values, and a willingness to be vulnerable—learning to be adaptable in times of adversity.

In being open to new experiences, both positive and negative, it became important for me to devote the necessary time, energy, and resources to focus on my growth. Identifying the supports and processes, which would encourage my ongoing learning and development as a leader, became a practice as important as participating in learning activities themselves. Developing practices of reflection and establishing a network of relationships were essential actions to support my learning.

Reflecting on/in Action. My appreciation for, and engagement in, reflection developed substantially over a ten-year period. Different from period-to-period was my level of understanding for the act of reflection, the attention and intentionality I gave to it, and my appreciation for the role others have in the process. Little structured reflection existed when I was a Civic Activist; as a Non-Leader, I intentionally created the space and time for the act.

As a Civic Activist, my practice was very much self-centred and immature; this characteristic was common of my relationship with reflection. Holding only a surface level understanding of self, based on an individualized approach to work, I lacked the necessary reflective mechanisms to support my growth. Although journals were kept, they were unstructured, unintentional, and often contained entry titles that illustrated surface level thinking which lacked depth: *"Life Sucks," "Who is the Greatest? Me.,"* and *"Everyone else is full of CRAP!."* These entries, and others, included passages like, *"I have reached my destination much quicker than I thought I would, there's no more I need to do."* At the time, I did not fully understand the purpose of reflection and, as a result, I was unable to fully benefit from the act. As I transitioned between periods, my appreciation for and ability to leverage reflection became more robust.

As a Formal Leader, I worked with my superiors to identify goals, opportunities for improvement, and to develop a plan for growth. This process often included journaling and reviewing the work I had previously completed. I began to recognize that intentional reflection, both as work was in progress and after the fact, were optimal opportunities for self-directed learning:

> *Meaning does not appear out of thin air. Meaning only exist when we say it*
> *does, and when we place value on something, regardless of how intangible it*

> *may be—like space. Without intentional, reflection, and feedback of some*
>
> *sort, there is a void.*

Creating space for the act of reflection, through the devotion of time and making use of available resources, helped me to grow as an individual and leader. As a Non-Leader, this level of appreciation grew further, insomuch as I dedicated more time and space to reflection:

> *Weaving acts of reflective practice throughout my daily life would be a*
>
> *better approach than removing myself completely from all aspects of community*
>
> *life in order to focus on intentional self-reflection and growth.*

I began to recognize the importance of receiving feedback from others and processing it in a constructive manner. Such self-awareness was almost non-existent when I was a Civic Activist:

> I wasn't mature enough at the time, and didn't appreciate the value in
>
> receiving feedback, nor did I understand how to leverage the feedback for my
>
> personal growth. ... I was never content with the feedback, mostly un-
>
> solicited, of other parties that seemed to direct my actions and learning.

As my work progressed, the value of receiving and processing feedback became more evident. To help inform the blind spots so common in self-reflection, I began to enlist the help of others in acts of reflection. The input I received from others helped me to better understand myself as an individual and my contributions to the relationships I had with the people around me.

Valuing Relationships. As I transitioned from one period to the next, I began to better appreciate the value which relationships bring to my practice. Recognizing relationships as a necessity in life seems rather elementary; however, during both my Civic Activist and Non-

Leader periods, I primarily completed individualized work and distanced myself from many

intimate relationships. This realization was an important one to come to. As a Civic Activist, I

realized that relationships are valuable to help establish an individual identity and to build a

sense of belonging. While I was unable to clearly articulate this at the time, I made observations

that led to such an understanding:

> *... it was a challenge at times to find individuals to support my work and*
> *encourage me. ... I never felt like I could receive the type of support and*
> *encouragement that you wanted? ... I felt as if my work wasn't on the same*
> *'level' ... because of this, an ongoing relationship wouldn't be valuable for*
> *them as well as I.*

This initial appreciation for the value of relationships became apparent as a Formal Leader and

then as a Non-Leader. In environments where relationships were formal and established, I began

to recognize the need to intentionally develop individual relationships for specific purposes:

> *I removed myself from a number of work environments that weren't in alignment*
> *of the ways I work best, and away from toxic relationships*
>
> *That roles, responsibilities, and relationships which exist in one location*
> *may only provide the learning necessary for a small section of skill*
> *development. More likely, many smaller learning environments and*
> *opportunities need to be accessed to develop as a well-rounded leader—this*
> *makes the assumption that each environment or place has something to offer*
> *based on the combination of the relationships, experiences which exist within*
> *it, and my role, responsibilities, and contributions.*

The value which specific relationships provided me in a given moment varied depending on what my basic needs were. As a Formal Leader, relationships were primarily in support of achieving organizational based goals: *"collectively coming together to identify, and achieve common goal."* Alternatively, those formed as both a Civic Activist and Non-Leader were to help limit periods of social isolation: *"being in public spaces and surrounded by strangers provides me the opportunity to be with other individuals without having to engage with them,"* and *"I navigated towards third places to still have connections with others, even if informal."* What I came to realize was the importance of how a person establishes relationships, the different types of relationships they form, and the quality of each individual relationship.

As my professional practice progressed, I began to recognize the value provided by different types of relationships. I discovered the value of both formal relationships—those where I had direct connections with others as a Formal Leader: *"I was grateful that I could bounce some ideas of those who had experienced similar situations before me; their perspective, while not always in alignment with mine, were helpful for me to find my way;"* and informal relationships—those whereby I was surrounded by others but not directly interacting with them as a Non-Leader: *"being surrounded by others made me feel less alone; while I am sure no-one noticed me, I felt like I was part of something bigger than myself."* In addition to assigning different types of value to the various relationships I was a part of, I too recognized the need to establish a balance in how I attended to myself as well as those I engaged with. As my professional practice evolved as a Formal Leader, there was greater balance between being attentive to myself and to the collectives I was invested in. Emphasis was placed on balancing the needs of both participants in the relationships:

> *When working intimately with others, it can be challenging to balance*
>
> *priorities, compromise, and set expectations—but it's highly necessary. If I*
>
> *don't give the same level of attention to myself as I do others—even more—*
>
> *than I can't attend to the relationships at the level I should.*

In returning to a period of working alone, as a Non-Leader, I started to appreciate the importance of attending to one's self and the integral role relationships play in an individual's growth:

> *For the better part of a decade I had been go-go-go, ... and as a result I:*
>
> *ended up neglecting myself and the self-care required; sabotaging personal*
>
> *relationships which should have been a priority after taking care of myself.*

Recognizing the importance of relationships seemed to be central to how I understood both leadership and place. Leadership developed as a highly relational concept within my practice, coming to understand that I could not be a leader without people to follow me—or for me to serve. Similarly, identifying that I often found meaning in specific spaces, and that this meaning was regularly connected to the relationships fostered with others inside these spaces and with the environments themselves.

Developing as a Leader. As my career progressed and I began to appreciate the value of the relationships in my life, I also started to form a personal understanding of what leadership entails. Beginning with my work as a Civic Activist, where the feedback from others was the primary way I understood the meaning behind my work, I began to recognize that leadership may be a relational concept: "*An individual cannot work or learn in a vacuum and that it is only in relation to others that their actions may be assigned meaning.*" This realization became more apparent when tasked with leading organizations, whose communities I

was not a part of, as a Formal Leader. I often felt "*like a foreigner in my own role, never really connected to, or engaged with those I was tasked to serve.*" During this period in my life, I may have characterized such roles as leadership; however, as I reflect on those experiences now, I would describe them more as management due to the lack of established, trusted relationships between myself and those I was tasked with serving.

Beginning as a Civic Activist, when I grew to appreciate that actions speak louder than words, I was motivated by "*others who [were] taking the steps necessary to improve things, however they see fit;*" then, as a Formal Leader, where I identified the leadership characteristics often missing from the purely management roles I assumed, I came to value "*competency, trust, and respect above all else.*" Then in stepping back, as a Non-Leader, I started to see that as a collective, groups can lead together. "*I am just one, of many, individuals who are dedicated to improving the places they call home; there are many who are invested in their home.*" Slowly, a less black and white distinction between management and leadership began to appear in front of me. While some managers are leaders, and many leaders take on management related duties, I began to better appreciate the power dynamics that exist in both assumed and assigned roles:

> *I started to take action, and new responsibilities on, because others were looking to me to lead. This was different than when I was managing a non-profit—my title said I should have the power to take necessary action, but I was bound by the direction of those I reported to.*

This realization, that titles may have some formal power but do not necessarily come with absolute power to influence reality, led the way to recognizing that leaders exist within the

context of a broader collective or within the relationships that they are a part of—that the title or
role of leader is assigned by the opinions of others:

> *Thinking back to the book, The Leader Who Had No Title by Robin Sharma, I was*
> *reminded that leadership is not a title, but an approach to working with*
> *others—inspiring, motivating, and generating a set of competencies across*
> *those on a team. That when others recognize the value of the actions you*
> *take, the actions themselves have greater weight and you may develop as a*
> *leader for others who are looking to follow in something worthwhile.*

In appreciating that leadership is not always synonymous with management, the roles I
assumed throughout my practice—which resonated with me the most—were those that had me in
supporting roles for projects, organizations, and movements. Although I could not name it at the
time, I began to associate with what Robert Greenleaf (1991) coined as Servant Leadership:

> *Helping others out and understanding the conditions they live/work in and the*
> *struggles they face were sources of motivation. A willingness to want to help*
> *others to achieve their goal provided motivation and direction for my own*
> *learning.*

Supporting a servant approach to leadership was a shift in my practice over time, leading me to
embrace participation and non-leadership. Serving others as a caring colleague in the workplace,
or playing the part of participant in daily community activities, became the common roles I
assumed as a Non-Leader. These roles were characterized by the thinking that "*I could*
dedicate a few hours here and there, and bring along others to help; this is what I
could easily contribute without overcommitting, or needing to be viewed as a
leader." Showing up to support other causes, as a way to help others recognize what may be

important in a community, was one way I chose to quietly lead. Similarly, I chose to push others into the spotlight which was one way for me to take on the role of Formal Leader: "*... it wasn't my work, it was theirs, and while I was the head of the organization the recognition wasn't mine to take. I didn't want the attention, and I didn't deserve it.*" Pushing others forward often meant that I downplayed my role, sacrificing an opportunity to recognize—and be recognized for—my own strengths and abilities.

The experiences from these two periods of practice are contrasted against those as a Civic Activist. During this early period of my career, I was often in the spotlight and trying to move issues forward through sheer force of will, rather than first serving the wellbeing of others:

> *I was leading from the front; bringing attention to the things that mattered most to me—the things that others should be caring about but weren't speaking up about. If no-one else was going to lead the charge and complete this work, I felt like I was left to do it myself. With that said, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get others to take more responsibility or action.*

As a Civic Activist, I thought that leaders needed to be at the forefront of all work and action. While this is certainly the case in many situations, this is not always true. The way I was working at this time was not in alignment with a servant focused practice, or the broader understanding of what leadership entails, that I would develop in later years. Becoming a leader also meant having greater situational awareness. Developed throughout my career, I came to better appreciate this in later years, becoming cognizant that different environments may be well suited to facilitate the development of specific skills. This ability, to identify locations of optimal learning, was illustrative of an growing understanding of place and its connection to my learning.

Understandings of Place. Early in my career, as a Civic Activist, I did not fully appreciate the importance or meaning of place. Working often on my own, I lacked any formal connection to a specific work space or to a given community: "*I was working from no single space on a regular basis, and those I did work from offered little in the way of community, or relevance to the work I was completing.*" This lack of a direct relationship to space hindered me in establishing the necessary connections to inform and grow my practice. As a Formal Leader, I found myself with more consistent and stable spaces to work from. This stability helped me to appreciate the benefits that working from a dedicated space can provide an individual's practice.

> *Work with others in a shared studio space provided me the opportunity to build a shared bond with others—even if we weren't working on the same projects together. I had people to bounce ideas off of, a place to leave my work at when the day finished, and a place to return back to the next day. It was like a second home.*

While I found a form of sanctuary in having a consistent space to work from, I still felt disconnected from the more complex notions of place. The spaces I was working from were not directly located in the places I was tasked with influencing; as such, I often felt like an outsider.

> *... the environments I was working from most often were located indoors, without direct connection to the people and communities I was to connect with. With many administrative duties, managerial roles, and the need to interact with other professionals, my work was less hands-on and more of a management/leadership role.*

I began to recognize that unlikely, or unfortunate, spaces can help to facilitate meaningful

learning, and that not *"every environment that is established for learning purposes may*

be conducive to learning if it doesn't suit an individual's learning style, or

interests." This realization, that not every learning environment will support learning in every

individual, was corroborated in noting that some spaces can be restrictive for the purposes of

learning and development, based both on their physical and social aspects:

> Context is everything. Experiences, learning, feedback, and actions—
>
> everything is informed by what is happening around an individual, where it is
>
> happening—the environments and places that actions exist within. Being aware
>
> of this would help me to process and gain value from the learning,
>
> experiences, and feedback I received.

In each period of professional practice, there was always a single space I felt greatest

connection to and developed a sense of place around. As I was establishing myself as a Civic

Activist, I found myself engaged with the social media platform, Twitter. As a non-physical

space, Twitter offered *"an opportunity to connect with other community members while*

allowing me to retain a level of anonymity and individuality." As I transitioned into

Formal Leadership, a greater emphasis was given to the value of physical spaces. Working for

organizations and small teams, I found myself occupying desks in different shared work spaces,

"communal areas where expenses and resources were shared by those renting the

space—where collaboration could occur between organizations and communities, and

new conflicts could transpire out of thin air." As a Non-Leader, I distanced myself

from both individuals and organizations to provide myself with the space needed to attend to my

own needs and to reflect on my values and practice. The result was finding myself more and

more often in Third Places—coffee shops, libraries, and public spaces "*that seemed to have more of a meaning connected to them, and are the places where the most interesting of learning experiences have found their genesis in terms of my work.*" These third places offered me a level of comfort and a sense of belonging simply by occupying spaces with others, without the responsibilities or commitments required of more formal relationships.

In considering my experiences, an understanding can take shape of how the learning that happens within community, primarily in Third Spaces, can help to foster the development of the essential skills to lead. As the findings from these experiences are examined closer, with the help of the guiding research questions and existing scholarly work, it is possible to form a clearer understanding of the role place has supporting learning and leadership development.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Emerging Themes

The findings of this auto-ethnography derive from the questions which guide the research (see Research Questions) and the literature which situates it amongst broader scholarly discussions. In revealing the significant findings which exist amongst the data, a series of themes emerge. In understanding the value of relationships in developing as a leader; the importance of curiosity and reflection for learning; how individuals and collectives form identity; and what type of meaning may be important for constructing a concept of place, an answer can begin to be formed to the research question, "How have learning experiences—embedded within community development efforts—impacted my leadership skill development?"

Leadership is Relational

How much consideration an individual affords to the role which relationships have on their development may directly influence their ability to become a leader within community.

Schweigert suggests that "[i]n communities, the essential dynamics and characteristics of leadership appear more clearly in relational patterns of thinking, acting, and responding" (Schweigert, 2007, p. 326). In understanding how relationships shape learning and identity, an individual can begin to define leadership in their own terms and identify what leader-like qualities others see in them.

When considering Servant Leadership, the form of leadership popularized by Robert Greenleaf (1991), the purpose of leadership is framed by the questions, "do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (Greenleaf, 1991, 'Who is the Servant-Leader,' para. 2) This approach to leadership situates those being served at the top of a leader / follower relationship hierarchy, with the leader at the bottom. The work of Brookfield and Preskill (2009) supports this view when proposing that learning—about the needs, interests, and work of others—is at the centre of leading. This view is contrasted by approaches to leading which more closely align with acts of management (Hanold, 2015; Schweigert, 2007), whereby the leader is positioned at the top, and the follower at the bottom, of the same relationship hierarchy. In recognizing how leaders and followers relate to one another, and how this relationship shapes an individual's understanding of leadership, it becomes more apparent the impact and importance of power structures in such relationships.

Identifying the different types of power—over, to, within, and with—and the relationship between the levels, forms, and spaces it occupies can help individuals understand how they believe power, responsibility, and leadership should be distributed within a community (Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Gaventa, 2006; Mathie, Cameron, & Gibson, 2017). Supported thoughts from Coady (1939), Kretzman and McKnight (1993), and Mathie and Cunningham

(2008), Wheatley (2009) advocate for speaking about leadership—and power—in terms of a collective mindset rather than focusing on individuals. Approaching leadership in such a way can increase the likelihood of a community realizing its full potential rather than a few select individuals. As such, understanding leadership within community settings may be best predicated on the idea that every individual can be a likely leader.

As Schweigert (2007) attests, leadership can be found "dispersed throughout the community, among leaders and followers" (p. 328). In acknowledging that anyone can be a leader, community members must recognize how they support one another and identify that each individual has the potential to become a leader within a collective. The identification of likely leaders may come from educators (Coady, 1939) or from practitioners (Freire, 1970; Knowles, Horton III, & Swanson, 2012; Schweigert, 2007). Often times, through the act of reflection, individuals who are motivated by personal experiences may self-identify as leaders (Delaney, 2010; Schweigert, 2007; Wheatley, 2009). In self-identifying as a leader, members exemplify self-empowerment, a characteristic that can transfer to other individuals within their networks, helping to generate a collective ability to create change within communities (Delaney, 2010).

Every relationship may offer an individual the opportunity to grow as a leader, depending on how willing the potential leader is to recognize the value that a given relationship offers. This openness extends beyond relationships. In being open, curious and interested to what new experiences and environments may provide, an individual may be taking a necessary first step to developing the essential skills to lead.

Curiosity Supports Learning and Leading

Building upon Lindeman's (1982) assertion that "the resource of highest value in adult education is the *learner's experience*" (p. 121, emphasis in original), both Delaney (2010) and

Freire (1970) recognize an approach to learning which values curiosity, and the welcoming of new experiences, for both individual and community empowerment. Being aware of the role curiosity plays in self-directed learning can be liberating for an individual, especially for leaders. In recognizing that any site can be one of learning (Lindeman, 1982; McKee, 2014; Shor, 1992), leaders must be curious in all environments, even those that may seem un-welcoming at first.

Recognizing that the easiest paths may not be as rewarding as their challenging counterparts, being adaptable to new environments, situations, and relationship; and being comfortable with the feeling of vulnerability (Brown, 2015), are traits which leaders commonly exhibit (Delaney, 2010; Schweigert, 2007; Wheatley, 2009). For an individual to grow, challenging situations and uncomfortable spaces must be sought out; this includes being receptive to the challenging feedback that can be provided from others and using this as a form of reflection for individual development (Luft & Harrington, 1955). While individuals may be attracted to spaces which foster positive relationships and working conditions, the level of comfort such spaces provide may be detrimental to the development of leaders. An individual may find value in balancing the time spent in both comfortable and uncomfortable locations; the latter may provide new learning experiences and allow an individual to develop skillsets and knowledge that they may not be exposed to in more familiar or comfortable locations.

How receptive an individual is to learning may have to do less with locations of learning and more with their approach. Formed from personal experience with knowledge, an individual's epistemological perspective may place greater emphasis on curiosity, in the process of learning, than that of educational environment or curriculum (Taylor, 2006). For leadership skill development, Brookfield and Preskill (2009) propose that learning leadership, a style whereby leaders position curiosity—through learning—at the centre of their practice, can be found

amongst various models of leadership. For leading in a community setting, taking an approach rooted in curiosity may be most appropriate. In considering what Brookfield and Preskill cite as collective (pp. 83–104), democratic (pp 149–170), servant and organic (pp. 6–15) approaches to leadership—methodologies that exhibit characteristics embedded in a community development mindset—leading through learning may best support Margaret Wheatley's (2009) vision that anyone can be a leader. Developing this idea further, if being curious is a characteristic which leaders exhibit, and which also supports the development of others, then it may be possible to establish a self-sustaining loop of leader development within a community.

One of the most challenging spaces where an individual can focus their curiosity may be in non-geographic spaces. In her work, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks suggests that traditional learning environments may not be the only locations where individual growth can transpire. hooks asserts that when learners focus on developing a praxis, the act of reflecting or theorizing itself is likely to become a site of learning (p. 61). Such a claim leads to recognizing the practice of reflection as an important element for learning and growth, while at the same time offering further thoughts for discussions regarding non-geographic understandings of place.

Reflection is Essential for Self-Care

Being attentive to one's self and taking care of personal wellbeing should be made a priority for leaders. Recognizing that the responsibility for one's actions begins with the individual, understanding how acts of self-care can impact professional practice is an important lesson for any leader to learn. This responsibility is one that leaders are not absolved from (Coady, 1939; Freire, 1970; Gore, 1990; hooks, 1994). Although accountable to others, leaders must first be accountable to themselves. One way for leaders to participate in self-care is through the practice of reflection. Collecting and considering thoughts, actions, and the choices made in

the moment can represent reflection *in* action and improve one's practice in the short term. Maintaining journals, keeping documents, amassing artifacts, and reviewing them following an experience or period of learning can act as reflection *on* action, carrying with it the potential to transform the information an individual has about their practice into knowledge for long term improvement. (Bolton, 2014; Schön, 1983). Consistent with Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, which values reflection as an integral part of experiential learning, the seminal work of Schön (1983) and the contributions of Botlon (2014) both insist on the importance of deliberate, regular, and structured reflection for individuals to develop their practice and awareness of self. In considering the need to understand one's position in relation to others in society, and within specific communities, reflection is an essential tool for developing consciousness (Freire, 1970; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). While not present in this auto-ethnography, there is value in practicing intentional collective critical reflection, that which Brookfield and Preskill (2009), Mündel and Schugurensky (2008), and Shor (1992) are all advocates for. In doing so, individual perspectives can be brought together for the common interest, increasing the empowerment of both individuals and collectives.

Openly soliciting feedback from others and having a structure to constructively process their views can provide leaders often overlooked perspectives to aid in their growth and development (Luft & Harrington, 1955). Given that learning happens primarily through doing and then reflecting after the fact, developing a praxis is essential for building upon an individual's experience, for it aids in explaining both actions and beliefs (Freire, 1970; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014). To recognize one's weaknesses, or areas for growth, leaders need to be vulnerable in their practice and in acts of reflection (Brown, 2015). The suggestion from Freire (1970), hooks (1994), and Shor (1992), that teachers can grow and be

empowered only if they allow themselves to be vulnerable while working with learners, similarly applies to leaders in relation to followers. As informal learning cannot be planned, intentional and deliberate reflection—following an experience—is necessary to assist individuals in recognizing their learning (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014). Reflecting on learning experience, relationships, and place can provide a necessary perspective as an individual shapes their identity as a practitioner, community member, and leader.

Identity Develops While Participating

An individual's identity may be directly related to the relationships they have with others they share space with. As understood through the African philosophy of Ubuntu which conveys—"I am because we are" (Tschaepe, 2013, p. 49), Mathie, Cameron, and Gibson (2017), and Gruenewald (2003) all recognize the interconnectedness between individuals and their collectives as being essential for developing a sense of belonging in community. However, simply relating to others may not be enough for leaders. Individuals may find it valuable to participate within a community in order to build quality relationships and to help construct an individual identity. Skerratt and Steiner (2013) note that while some individuals may participate in more public ways, such as assuming formal leadership roles within public view, other members may select non-participation—taking actions outside of the view of the general public or community they serve—as one way to contribute. Taking a less-public approach to participation can aid in shaping one's position in community and their overall identity, as they have an opportunity to make their contributions and to take action without unsolicited or distracting feedback, and can focus their attention and energy to further their personal development. When considering the development of leaders within community, participation becomes even more important. Leaders are likely to be "of the place" (Mathie & Gaventa, 2015,

p. 13), a position advocated by Freire (1970) and Wheatley (2009). Previously, the idea that leadership is relational also impacts how an individual's participation can shape both the way others view them and the view they have of themselves.

Although spaces are shaped by the people who occupy them (Bradshaw, 2008; Foroughi & Durant, 2013; Johnson, 2012), the inverse can also be true: individuals can be shaped by spaces primarily through their interactions with others within them. While an individual may form a personal connection to space, often developing a sense of place, these connections may only take on meaning by engaging with others in the same location (Tschaepe, 2013). It is through dialogical processes (Delaney, 2010; Shor, 1992) and participation (Skerratt & Steiner, 2013; Westoby & Shevellar, 2016) that individuals can generate a shared bond and sense of identity through listening, asking questions, accepting, and trusting others. Without participating, individuals may feel a lack of belonging and remaining foreigners in the spaces they occupy.

Place is Constructed Through Understanding

The role place has in developing the skills essential for leading within community may have more to do with an individual's understanding of context and networks than how they relate directly to location-based concepts. Coady (1939) was of the belief that collective experiences shape an individual's attitude, environment, and the world around them. Building upon this thought, an individual's ability to understand and interpret the meaning of the relationships they are a part of may help to establish a space as a place (Shor, 1992); whereby, greater meaning is given to the relationships fostered rather than the location they transpire in. Supporting thoughts on the importance of the relationships that are embedded within space are provided by Bridger & Alter (2006), Foroughi & Durant (2013), Lefebvre (1991), and Nesbit & Wilson (2010). Considering place beyond a mathematical equation, and giving greater consideration to the

relationships which are established and fostered within an given environment, may help in understanding what Johnson (2012) meant by meaning when defining place.

While specific environments may prove to be a container for unique activities to unfold within—learning, relationship building, and community development, for example—their actual level of importance for developing an understanding of place may be relatively little in comparison to other elements. What may be more important for creating an individual understanding of place include reflection—the mechanisms available to consider the value of experiences in specific spaces (Bolton, 2014; Freire, 1970; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014; Schön, 1983); resources—the "task, time, team, and technique" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 147) to dedicate to learning, growth, and development; and relationships—establishing a network of peers to support personal growth (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Mathie & Gaventa, 2015; Tschaepe, 2013). These elements may provide the necessary conditions for helping an individual to develop a holistic understanding of their experiences, what meaning they contain, and, ultimately, the role they assume in a given space or community (Westoby & Shevellar, 2016). As Gruenewald (2003) reminds us, "[w]hat we know is, in large part, shaped by the kinds of places we experience and the quality of attention we give them" (p. 645). Being attentive to the spaces we occupy, and the learning experiences they provide, may be key to constructing personal definitions of place.

As Nesbit and Wilson (2010) note, "Western understandings of place and space … are too restrictive for understanding their role in educational settings" (p. 391). As such, a reconsideration of place may need to be at the forefront of conversations regarding its role in shaping adult learning and community leadership skill development. Grounding an understanding of place in cultural, ecological, and social traditions becomes increasingly

important as individuals are less tied to communities of geography and form around collectives of identity (Bradshaw, 2008; Gruenewald, 2003; Johnson, 2012; Kudryavtsev, Stedman, & Krasny, 2012). Developing a broader appreciation of what constitutes place—beyond geographic constructs—might be most useful to aid individuals in fully appreciating its value.

Chapter 6: Summary, Analysis, and Interpretation

In answering the question, "How have learning experiences embedded within community development efforts impacted my leadership skill development?", this research aimed to identify what types of learning experiences are most likely to support the development of the skills essential to lead in community and to recognize to what extent place shapes this process. While the intentions of this research project were never to reconsider or construct new definitions of place, it was unavoidable that a personal and expanded understanding of the term would emerge.

The definition of place borrowed from Johnson—"location endowed with meaning," (Johnson, 2012, p. 830)—offered an initial point of understanding for this research to take shape. However, what constituted meaning, in terms of place, was never clear. In recognizing that meaning is subjective, given that an individual's perception of and connection to a given location is highly personal, identifying a more widely understandable definition of place may have been inevitable. Building upon research that has come before (Bradshaw, 2008; Gaventa, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003; Johnson, 2012; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), I offer a conceptualization on what may constitute a place based on the findings of this research:

Place is important, for learning and growth, insomuch as we understand it as an intangible, yet highly contextual element. Place can be considered a construct of the relationships we are open to building and engaging with; our ability to recognize that

every environment is an experience, in of itself—a potential opportunity for learning; and

an individual openness to using the resources and mechanism available to us to help

deconstruct the interactions we share with others and with the spaces we occupy.

Learning experiences, embedded within community development efforts, have the potential to

impact the likelihood an individual will develop the essential skills to lead if the potential leader

is attentive to the experiences they engage with through the act of reflection (Bolton, 2014;

Schön, 1983); recognizes the importance of relationships for learning, leading, identify

formation, reflection, and personal well-being (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Mathie &

Cunningham, 2008; Tschaepe, 2013); and approaches their work with a sense of curiosity and an

open mind (Kolb, 1984; Lindeman, 1982).

Spaces in and of themselves—locations which are void of meaning—may have little

impact on an individual's development. Only when someone is ready, willing, and able to

recognize a space as one which offers meaning—for learning, relationship building, or

reflection—can it be transformed into a place and have influence on their growth. In using these

findings from my own experiences as a leader, I hope others can identify how similar skills can

be fostered within community members. With that said, this research is far from complete. This

work considers the experiences of a single leader and has a limited scope as it covers a relatively

short timeframe. Given these factors, it is impossible for this research to fully reveal the multi-

dimensional concept of place and how it connects to adult learning and community leadership.

Recommendations

The intent of this research was to build upon existing literature related to the importance

of experience (Kolb, 1984; Lindeman, 1982), space and learning (Gruenewald, 2003; McKee,

2014; Shor, 1992), and community leadership (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Schweigert, 2007; Wheatley, 2009). This research aimed to generate new knowledge while identifying opportunities for future research efforts by identifying a gap in the literature related to the connection between spatial elements and adult education (Gruenewald, 2003; Nesbit & Wilson, 2010), specifically for community-based action (Foroughi & Durant, 2013). In focusing on my experiences as a community leader, my intention was to identity how essential leadership skills are developed in community and to what extent place influences this process.

While interpreting the data generated through reflective journaling and autobiographical reconstruction, a series of significant findings were revealed. For informal learning and learning to lead within community, the importance of personal experience and reflecting on/in action were findings consistent with the work of Lindeman (1982), Kolb (1984) and Kolb and Kolb (2005); and, Bolton (2014) and Schön (1983), respectively. Similarly, how an individual can develop as a leader, the value relationships provide, and how place influences learning, were themes which echoed the work of scholars such as Brookfield and Preskill (2009), Schweigert (2007) and Wheatley (2009); Tschaepe (2013); and, Nesbit and Wilson (2010), respectively. The data generated by reflecting on my experiences as a Civic Activist, Formal Leader, and Non-Leader, helped to inform an appreciation of what learning experiences within community may support the development of likely leaders. In understanding how I develop leadership skills, the hope is that other professionals, whose experiences may be similar to mine, might identify how leaderships skills can be fostered within themselves and in other community members. To do this, an expanded understanding of what constitutes place may be necessary to fully recognize what impact it can have on the identification growth of likely leaders.

Place may be important for developing the essential skills for community leadership, in so much as, an individual can understand the value and meaning of the relationships which exist within any given experience. Geographic space, or pre-defined understandings of what an environment may be best suited for, may be less important in terms of the value the physical elements of the space can provide. More important may be the modes and mechanisms for reflection: availability of time, energy, and focus, and the networks of peers an individual surrounds themselves with to support their growth. These elements can help an individual to recognize what leadership entails in relation to their surroundings, and how both physical and theoretical places can help to shape the skills essential for leading in community.

Place is a vague and abstract concept based on nuanced interpretations. Given that any location can be a space of learning (McKee, 2014; Shor, 1992), and that theorizing in of itself may be a place (hooks, 1994), it seems only appropriate that research which expands an understanding regarding the relationship between place, adult learning, and community leadership be ongoing. While spatial learning concepts such as experiential learning spaces (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), situated cognition, and contextual learning (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991) lend themselves to discussions about where learning transpires and the value different locations can offer, they were not topics of regular discussion in the literature which informed this research. Further research into the importance of space and place, for learning and leading within community, could give greater consideration to these foundational learning concepts.

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Appendix A - Reflection Panels

2007–2011. Civic Activist

01. 2007–2011: Civic Activist

FIFTY WEEKS.CA

In the wake of fizzling New Year's resolutions, people are turning to the Internet to help motivate and inspire their creativity in 2010

By Stuart A. Thompson
Gazette Staff

Having trouble sticking to your New Year's resolution?

You've got nothing on Kevin Van Lierop.

For each week in 2010 the London artist will be doing something he's never done before as his latest project, *Fifty-Two Weeks*. Writing an erotic story, directing a movie and wearing a full-body tape suit are on his list.

"Any resolution I've ever made I've broken," the 26-year-old Western graduate student said. "So I'm not looking at it that way anymore."

Some of the wilder ideas include PARK(ing) Day, where an impromptu park is created inside a parking space with some turf and a bench. Another involves putting 100 notes in 100 balloons and setting them free. The notes would have a question and his email so people could reply if they find it.

He's also letting the public keep tabs on his progress, posting each week's mission online and asking for ideas through his Twitter account.

"I wouldn't have the motivation to stay on top of it if I didn't have people checking on me," he said. "I don't want to look like a hack or that I can't complete anything."

Fifty-two weeks may seem like a small number, but Van Lierop knows from experience these projects become more demanding as the year goes on.

In 2008, Van Lierop took a picture of himself every day and posted them online.

"I thought I could do it every day. And about a month into it I thought, 'This is going to suck,'" he recalled. "I was trying to do different expressions or wear a different hat but it gets old after a while."

He still finished the project — 365 pictures strong — but said he relied on online followers to keep

habit. "But if you commit to 365 things, then you have to do it until next New Year's."

Devlin is ahead of schedule right now but said the toughest challenge is a way to find enough movies and watch them without breaking the bank. His blog will work like a journal where he can keep track of his thoughts. If people use it to keep tabs on his progress, so be it, he says.

Van Lierop is following in the steps of New York photographer Bill Wadman, who completed a 365-day challenge and 52-week challenge.

Wadman's projects included writing songs, taking photos and writing an owner's guide for himself.

"Bill Wadman likes to attempt new challenges, so don't be afraid to test his limits," he wrote in the third-person manual. "Especially if the task is creativity related."

Creativity — or a lack of it — is what motivated Van Lierop to take up the challenge.

"I get really comfortable with anything I do in life. I enjoy doing stuff that's outside of it, but this is pushing to an extreme," he says.

While Van Lierop still searches for his passion, he knows this will take on a similar challenge to push their creativity beyond their creative comfort zones.

"If you don't know what you want to do, just try a bunch of everything, because you'll find out what you don't have any interest in doing, and you'll find out what your passion is."

What's on your list? Go to westerngazette.ca and share your ideas.

"I get really comfortable with anything I do in life. I enjoy doing stuff that's outside of it, but this is pushing it to an extreme."
—**Kevin Van Lierop**
London artist

It's not only Van Lierop taking to the Internet for public yearning challenges as a solution to the half-hearted New Year's resolutions that quickly fade. Matt Devlin, a third-year student in film and media, is determined to watch 365 movies in 365 days and post about them online.

"When you put that kind of term out it keeps you focused," he said. "If you want to change something about your life, you do that for a few weeks maybe, then you fall back into your normal

him motivated.

2011-06-29

Thursday, February 03, 2011

Title:
Places Called Home

Subtitle:
a visual narrative of the spaces we inhabit

Description:
Each day we find ourselves living within unique environments; walking past store-fronts, residents and homes, occupying spaces that are filled with extraordinary possibilities. It isn't too often that we stop and take the time needed to appreciate these spaces for what they are at the very core, our homes.

Places Called Home is meant to be a visual narrative of the spaces we inhabit. Focused on London, Ontario, this collection of work will document the *places* we pass by while walking, where we go to complete our 'work', and where we eat and sleep. *Places Called Home* aims to illustrate that there is more to these every day *places* than may appear at first glance.
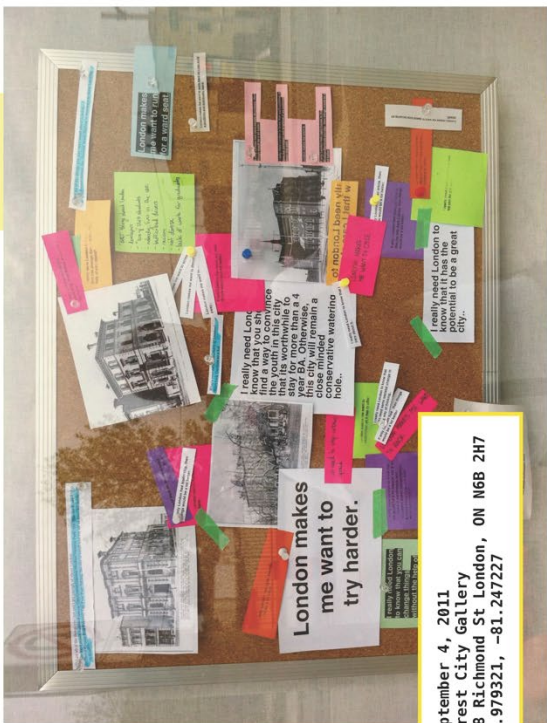
September 4, 2011
Forest City Gallery
258 Richmond St London, ON N6B 2H7
42.979321, -81.247227

London makes me want to try harder.

"When you've lived in one *place* long enough (in my case, Scotland), you almost become immune to its beauty, blind to its charm regardless of how unequivocal it may be. I believe that we all subconsciously develop blinders; filtering out what's really around us and replacing it with what we've come to expect. I decided to remove my blinders for the day, fill my 'tank with gas' (as our American friends would say), blast Queen full volume, and take to the road with no real plans other than seeing something new, and photographing it. I urge you to do the same."

— Ashley Baxter

2011–2014. Formal Leader

02. 2011–2014: Formal Leader

1a. Mid 2011 (Apr–Jun)

I do not see myself with EL beyond six months. While I know the position and opportunity is what I will make of it, and full of opportunities, experiences, and potential, I can't help but to think of my mental state.

Perhaps this is my short sightedness and inability to plan for the long term, but it's exactly what I thought it would be, regardless of what that is.

What I need to do is search for something that meets my needs, but I'll need to define what those needs are first.

1b. Mid 2011 (Sat Aug 20, 2011)

I am stuck in a place at the moment where everything creative about me has come to a stop.

I have been in this place before and it isn't healthy, for myself or anyone around me!

I miss the feeling and energy that I had when I was in school, not working, but teaching, learning, and discovering more about myself and who I am.

My current work is something I cannot wait to leave at the door at the end of the day, at the same time it is all I can think about when I'm not there.

I don't know what any of this means.

I know that more education isn't answer, but perhaps it is at the same time.

Have I yet to find what it is that I am meant to do in this life? I don't know, and I am both fearful and happy at the same time that I might never know.

I am becoming very apathetic which is something I don't enjoy at all, however, I'm not sure what the changes that I want to see or how to go about creating it.

I find that current systems, processes, leaders and established norms are my greatest nemesis. I think that I can work within them and that I can success, but don't care to.

I know that greater things can happen, progress can be made, and change, for better or worse, can come about through 'alternative' means, however, I am simply not sure where to start in order to be able to do this the way I feel I need to.

After doing chores today I've sat and watched a movie and tried to find some type of amusement on the internet with no success. I feel that I should and need to be doing something else, something meaningful, however, I do not have the energy or heart at the moment to even begin.

So now, I sit in the park, along writing this, trying to think of the way to get out of one thing and into the next, not because I am bored, but simply because I know it isn't right for me.

Yes, the skills, connections and name I will make for myself over the next 6 months can be grand, however, I know that it will kill me inside.

I have been to this place before, and in some ways made the wrong choice. I am here once again. In a circle I seem to be going.

How to get out of this I do not know, and where to head next, I don't know that either.

What I do know is that there is more out there and there is something better, I just need to find a way to discover it, fall in love with it and live.

2a. Tuesday February 19, 2013

I need to find the more eloquent way to remove myself from the our street organization. While I appreciate what it is trying to do I don't think it is a good use of my time, energy, and resources. I have helped my share from the beginning until now but I think I need to move onto things that I can directly influence, create and build. I know that I need to better focus my time and this is a first needed step.

...

I wonder if people are actively trying to take advantage of my time or if society as a whole just thinks it is ok in this age to disrespect and take advantage of other people's time? ml know I have, in the past, taken advantage of other people's time, but I feel as if I have become more aware of this and have taken steps to take less advantage of other people's time.

2b. Wednesday February 20, 2013

While I often get very irritated when working with Ryan and the guys from thread I know what in the end it will have been a good position and experience to have been in and received. Many times I wonder if someone with a more level head should be present and working with us all to keep things on track and to help facilitate better collaboration. I need to learn to be more patient, understanding, and overall a better leader but it is often very hard when given the individuals I find myself working with. I need to make sure I take the steps needed to make this a learning experience and get out of it as mush as I can in addition to the work itself.

2c. April 25, 2013

LGC [Little Gems Contest]-Got word from Ryan today that I am not allowed to present at the Urban League tonight on the Little Gems Contest. Cheryl Smith wants to have a staff member present to answer any questions that the Urban League might have. This is disappointing given the short notice and the work I have put into preparing for this. Not only does this look bad on me as an individual but it makes me question if I'm being fully respected and valued as an employee, contractor or not.

3a. September 11, 1014 @home

"Passive adventuring.... Is an art form" The Art of Wandering - pg.199

...

IT feels like fall is upon us. Even with a couple of weeks left of formal summer, the cool air is here and the atmosphere has started to change.

My attitude towards my job is at the point where I have too often been in the past. A point where I don't care and I have stopped trying to find value in what I do. I often think that I am the problem, and to a certain extent I/we all are, but this time it is not me.

Dysfunctional workplaces and people who do not know how to lead; there are issues that aren't being addresses regardless of how much I try to help them get addresses, and I'm at a loss of what to do.

When I tool this role, chosen over others, UnLondon and Emerging Leaders, I had a feeling that it wouldn't work out and I wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt, however, it wasn't meant to be.

I've tried, I really have, but either the work itself, the environment, the leadership, or lack there of, or a combination of all the above have created a "culture", for lack of a better word, where I am finding it almost impossible to thrive in, even in the smallest amount.

I don't know what to do.

But I am in an interesting place.

With Katie out of work I'm the 'sole breadwinner' and while we look after our own expenses in this relationship it is difficult to place us in a situation where there is no 'reliable' income.

Yes, I've created my own wealth in the past, and will in the future, but its generally been on my own terms with other income I could count on. Now, this would be a 'do-or-die' situation, so to speak.

With savings in the bank, I guess I could give 'this?" a go, whatever this is, but I need to make the honest effort to invest all of myself and my resources or else it will just end up being like everything else I do in life—half assed.

September 18, 2012
Dundas & Richmond
London, ON N6A 3C8
42.983708, -81.249701

"During this time, when I was changing how I used Twitter, it changed me as a person. I started to become less introverted. I started to engage with people more, overcame many of my fears and anxieties and became part of a larger community that I felt was trying to improve the very place I called home. Twitter provided me an outlet to learn more about who I was as a person, an outlet that until that point I'd never been able to find. Perhaps the most important piece about the influence Twitter had over me as a person was how well it facilitated the building of physical connections that simply began as digital ones."

– Farewell Twitter
2012-12-8 06:44

"For a 5 year period every moment I had a chance to see part of this country I took it which normally meant visiting someone I knew in one of the provincial capitals simply due to limited financial resources. While visiting friends and family I explored the urban spaces I was inhabiting like they were the places I called home. I veneered into the urban wilderness to experience the "great outdoors" as much as I could while still being within yelling distance of the place I was staying. While I haven't been able to visit ever province I've experienced more than I ever thought I would given the life I've had so far.
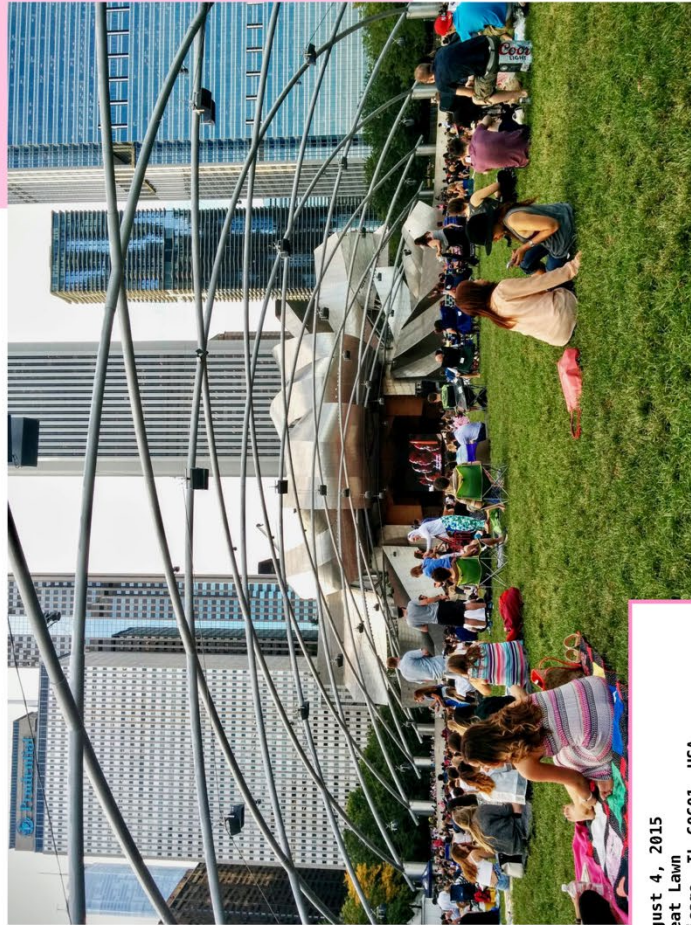
But still I want more."

– Journal, Monday, 10 September, 2012 2:4pm

2014–2017. Non-Leader

03. 2014–2017: Non-Leader

"Are we effective in engaging, educating, and empowering citizens in ways that enable them to take greater ownership of the places they call home?"

– Master of Adult Education Application Package, 2017 –

August 4, 2015
Great Lawn
Chicago, IL 60601, USA
41.882292, -87.621835

Appendix B - Guiding Questions for Reflection

- **Descriptive Questions**

    o Did I do things differently this time compared to other occasions?

    o How did I react to various circumstances during the episode?

    o How did I speak to different individuals?

    o How did my plans unfold? How faithful was I to the plans I had made?

    o How engaged was I? How engaged were my classmates?

    o What did I learn?

    o What did I think was useful and what was not?

    o What happened in this episode? Who did what?

    o What kind of talk happened? Who was talking to whom? To whom did I speak, and who spoke to me?

    o What outcomes did I hope for? What outcomes were achieved? Not achieved?

- **Metacognitive Questions**

    o Am I more comfortable with planned instruction or spontaneous instruction?

    o How comfortable am I with being honest with myself about my own learning growth and needs?

    o How comfortable am I with being honest with myself about my own professional practice?

    o How comfortable am I with figuring things out on my own? With setting my own learning objectives?

    o How do I feel when my learning is controlled by someone other than myself?

- o How do I feel when my teaching or professional learning is controlled by someone other than myself?

- o How do I react when a learning task is particularly difficult or uninviting?

- o How do I typically act when things don't go accordingly to plan? What effect does my reaction have on the outcomes?

- o How do I typically react when things don't do according to plan? What effect does my reaction have on the outcomes?

- o How motivated to learn am I? How do I become motivated? Do I see any connections between my own motivation and that of my classmates?

- o What do I believe about teaching, learning, and student-teacher relationships? Where did these beliefs come from?

- o What leverage do I think I have for turning problem situations into learning opportunities?

- o When does it seem easy, and when does it seem difficult, to maintain a positive attitude in my work?

- o When does it seem easy, and when does it seem difficult, to maintain a positive attitude towards my education?

- o Where do new ideas come from? How do I go about maintaining a curious and experimental attitude in my work?

- o Where do new ideas come from? How do I go about maintaining a curious and experimental attitude towards my learning?

- **Analytic Reflection**

- How did I assign meaning to the experience? How do I think others assigned meaning?

- To what extent did I check on the instructor's intention or meaning?

- To what extent did I invite critique of events/materials or alternative points of views?

- To what extent did I invite critique of events/materials or alternative points of views? What problems seem to have been resolved, what problems are still there, and what new problems have surfaced?

- To what extent did I try to think of different points of view?

- What assumptions or attributions did I make about people's reasons for responding as they did?

- What cause-and-effect patterns or relations can I detect?

- What does this experience teach me about myself?

- What does this experience teach me about myself? My instructor? My classmates? My program of study?

- What patterns did I notice in my own responses and in the responses of my classmates or the instructor?

- What problems seem to have been resolved, what problems are still there, and what new problems have surfaced?

- Why did I choose the particular strategies I did? How did I act, react, or respond as I did?

- Why did I choose the particular strategies I did? Why did I act, react, or respond as I did?

- **Evaluative Questions**

  o How can I make learning more meaningful and relevant for myself and for my classmates?

  o How can I make learning more meaningful and relevant for students and my classmates?

  o How did it compare to the experiences of other students I know?

  o How did this experience compare to previous experiences?

  o To what extent might the desire for planning or for creative diversions be a function of personality style? To what extent are each of these approaches to instruction learned or learnable?

  o What could I do differently next time?

  o What did I not know or learn that I needed to?

  o What differences did I detect between anticipated outcomes and realized outcomes?

  o What role might colleagues and administrators play in promoting a climate of curiosity and experimentation?

  o What went well and what went wrong? Why did these differences emerge?

- **Reconstructive Questions**

  o How does the culture of my institution promote or hinder the use of new ideas?

  o What changes do I think might be necessary in my thought patterns? My response patterns?

  o What changes do I think might be necessary in my thought patterns? My response patterns? My teaching practice?

- What could I do differently next time?

- What leverage do I have to make changes?

- What plans do I need to write out? What plans can I leave ad hoc?

- What should I continue to do?

- What should I do differently?

- What strategies do I use to create a positive climate for my instructor, my classmates, and myself? What strategies have I not used? What strategies might I use next?

- Where can I go for support and encouragement when tough times hit?

- Where could I go for new ideas?