

St. Francis Xavier University

Connecting Adult Education, Community Development, and Place:  
A Literature Review

By

Kevin Van Lierop  
201703750

AE510  
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Dr. Carole Roy  
Advisor

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## Table of Contents

Overview of the Sections of this Review .....	2
Scope of Search .....	3
Informal Learning .....	4
The Importance of Reflection .....	5
The Role of Educators .....	7
Community Development .....	9
Defining Community .....	9
Active Citizenship and Participatory Democracy .....	10
Fostering Leadership .....	13
Place .....	17
Place and Space .....	17
Perspectives on Place .....	19
Sites of Learning .....	20
Summary of the Literature .....	23
Power and Empowerment .....	23
Social Capital .....	25
The Individual and Collective .....	26
Theoretical Gaps .....	28
Conclusion .....	30
References .....	31

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). This literature review aims to uncover how adult education, community development, and *place* are connected by examining an existing body of research. Providing direction for this review is the preliminary research topic: to investigate the importance of place for fostering citizen *empowerment* within community-based, educational environments. However, 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.

### **Overview of the Sections of this Review**

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. Next, 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. Lastly, a series of theoretical gaps are identified from across the reviewed literature, leading to a revised research topic which will guide further reading and scholastic investigation.

## Scope of Search

The literature considered in this review was identified primarily through Google Scholar queries. A clearly defined set of guidelines acted as the search methodology to pinpoint literature that is accessible through publications which St. Francis Xavier University, Western University, and Fanshawe College have active subscriptions to. Searches were limited to items relevant to recent years, those published from 2010 to 2017. A combination of search terms highlighted literature which spanned multiple key themes. Search terms included *informal learning*, *community development*, *place*, *place-based*, *power*, and *empowerment*. Additional terms used to narrow search results included *adult education*, *adult learning*, and *citizen*. Items excluded from searches—that may provide additional research value—included dissertation abstracts, raw qualitative and quantitative data, and publications primarily for non-academic audiences in the areas of community development, placemaking, and community education.

After drafting a preliminary reading list, an analysis was conducted of the references that were cited within each source. This analysis was carried out to identify the notable scholars—and their seminal works—so that they could be considered in this review. These works fell outside of the initial search scope; some of their publication dates were too early while others failed to satisfy various combinations of the previously noted search terms. Newly identified publications were considered for inclusion based on how frequently they were cited by others, their scholarly value, and their relevance to the three primary areas under review: informal learning, community development, and place. Additional readings were also added based on the recommendation of my advisor, Dr. Carole Roy of St. Francis Xavier University. These supplemental readings focused on leadership to provide the necessary context and foundational knowledge for future reading and research efforts.

## 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).

### **The Importance of Reflection**

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).

### **The 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.

### Defining 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 individual's understand their relationship to one another. Bradshaw (2008) considers community beyond a defining element of geographic place, stating that “[p]laces 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, were [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; Madsen & Hammond, 2005). 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 (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 (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. (Madsen & Hammond, 2005, p. 74)

Understanding leadership within community settings may be best predicated on the idea that every individual is a 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 (Boeren, 2011; Peeters et al., 2014; Prins & Drayton, 2010), for all sources within a community should be considered when identifying and establishing new leaders.

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). 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, Gruenewald (2003) offers that “space is the medium through which culture is reproduced” (p. 629). Evaluating this notion against a *place-conscious* approach to education, Gruenewald 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). Although scholars agree that place differs from space, what creates this difference is unclear.

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 is able to 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 through 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 faults, 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).

### **The Individual and Collective**

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 research reviewed here provides a foundation of knowledge towards illustrating this point, it is not without gaps.

### **Theoretical Gaps**

The purpose of this literature review is to consider existing scholarly work across the areas of adult education, community development, and place to inform the preliminary research topic: to investigate the importance of place for fostering citizen empowerment within community-based, educational environments. While identifying common themes, critiques, and debates across these areas of study, a series of theoretical gaps have surfaced. The most notable of these gaps follow and provide value for future reading and research efforts.

Research related to informal learning is 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).

Although adult education has a history of being closely connected to community development, a focus on how these two fields' collectively foster citizenship and 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). 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 Whatley (Madsen & Hammond, 2005) 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 education to community development for the purposes of fostering leadership.

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, the two aforementioned gaps point towards an opportunity for future research to adequately consider the value of place for education and for community related purposes.

## Conclusion

This literature review began by considering a body of research focused on informal learning, community development, and place. Prominent underlying themes—such as power and empowerment, social capital, and the relationship between individuals and collectives—emerged from the works reviewed. Additionally, theoretical gaps, which indicate where future academic efforts can be focused, were identified: the highlighting of informal learning, the development of community leadership, and an understanding of place that goes beyond seeing it as a container for education.

Places are fundamentally pedagogical because they are contexts for human perception and for participation with the phenomenal, ecological, and cultural world. What we know is in large part, shaped by the kinds of places we experience and the quality of attention we give them. ... Either we can awaken to the significance of places, or we can teach each other, through neglect, a lack of attention. (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 645)

While some attention has been given to the concept of place, the research reviewed herein failed to indicate whether place or *local space*—to use Gruenewald's (2003) terminology—has any influence over how community leaders develop their core set of competencies for driving local change. There is value in understanding whether place plays a more prominent role in adult education activities, specifically the fostering of community leaders. Therefore, the preliminary research topic presented at the beginning of this review (see p. 2) has been updated to read the following: to investigate the importance of place when fostering community leadership through informal adult learning activities.

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