St. Francis Xavier University

Fostering Community Leadership in Place:
Exploring Informal Learning Through Auto-ethnography

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Abstract

The purpose of this auto-ethnography is to fill 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. In asking the question, "How have learning experiences embedded within community development efforts impacted my leadership skill development?" this research identifies learning experiences which are most likely to foster the development of community leaderships skills, and 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 form the basis for an autobiographical reconstruction and the creation of reflective accounts which centre on artifacts, snapshots, and metaphors. Themes which emerge from the research include understanding that: 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 reconsider the definition of place, a conceptualization which elaborates on what may constitute a place is offered, providing personal and expanded understandings of the term.

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

Table of Contents

The purpose of this auto-ethonography is to investigate what role *place* has in shaping the learning experiences most influential for developing *leadership* skills in *community*. This research aims to fill one small gap amongst existing literature regarding the relationship between place and learning, specifically the connecting of spatial elements to adult education for community-based action.

Overview of Report

The content of this research report is organized under a series of headings which outline its purpose, process, and results. Beginning with the context necessary to justify this research undertaking, a brief summary of the research problem is then provided to establish a foundation of understanding. To support interpretation of the research findings, the questions which guide the process are included, as well as the definitions of key terms referred to throughout. Then, the limitations which I cannot control, and the delimitations that I am required to disclose are both highlighted, along with my positionality as the researcher and subject.

Next, the rationale for this research and the methodology under which it unfolds are clearly outlined, providing readers with an opportunity to understand the decisions made, and the actions taken. The methods which were followed, for both data creation and analysis, are detailed, including how data was coded, categorized, and interpreted. Ethical considerations are highlighted, and thoughts on the trustworthiness of the research are offered.

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: how, and what I learn; my development as a leader; 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.

The importance of the data and findings are discussed next, in relation to the questions which provide purpose for this research. Context for the examination of findings is provided by scholarly work across the areas of informal learning, community development, and place. Emerging themes are noted which highlight the importance of: self-care; reflection; the relationships we foster; being open and adaptable to experiences; how the concept of place is understood.

Finally, the significance of this research and its findings are considered. The intended purpose of this research is reviewed alongside its actual outcomes, and consideration is given to how the findings relate to the landscape of academic literature. Thoughts are offered on: the implications of this work, recommendations for next steps, potential future research, and the ongoing reconsideration of how we understand learning, community, leadership, and place.

Context: Background to this Research Project

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 impact my growth as a community leader.

My interest in leadership within a community context is based on the belief that anyone can be a leader. In looking beyond individuals who assume roles that characterize management more than leadership (Hanold, 2015), I am interested in how individuals without specific hierarchical titles (Wheatley, 2009) and those who create the power necessary to lead with (Freire, 1970) assume leadership roles in their communities. In considering the leadership roles

held throughout my career, I am reminded that the most rewarding and respected experiences have been those without any formal permission, title, or recognition granted.

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 happens, the topic itself has not received the focus it may deserve in 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 add additional value to the existing 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 a series of critical incidents from select community leadership roles I assumed between 2007 and 2017. 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, and 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 in this report.

The scope of this research is defined by periods of professional practice identified from the content of 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 my 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, in order 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 organization in the reflective accounts. This information was intentionally omitted in order 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. Although in an auto-ethnography the researcher is also the subject, and thus has some control over the process of data creation, 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 elements of culture, politics, and social (see Research Methods). 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 whom is unable to fully control what thoughts the interviewee ultimately shares which is to be used as research data.

The content of this research report assumes that the reader has some familiarity with the academic areas of: adult education, community development, leadership, and place. While the concept of place can be complex and highly nuanced, it is understood that the reader will be open to appreciating that many different meanings of the term may need to be considered.

Positionality

Making use of my personal experiences as the primary source of data positions 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, data creation, and interpretation. Although I share what I believe is most important to explain my positionality, to respect my privacy I have selected to exclude specific details, as needed.

As a community leader, and educator in higher education, I am granted some established power and social status based on the fact that 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 many counties would consider a low income family (Government of Canada, 2016), I am a first-generation graduate student. To be where I am today, both academically and professionally, I have invested 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 serve. This position in society creates a specific lens through which I complete both research and professional work. Because of this, I acknowledge this research is based upon only 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. Given this fact, I recognize that some comments regarding data, or interpretations of available literature, may not directly align with current community development, or leadership, trends and best practices.

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 highly personal, what comprises meaning is 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 leadership. 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 and allows for roles from across my practice to be interpreted and analysed.

As 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 use as a collective element, as it often is, but also accounts for the changing habits and movements of members which may negate the influence of place altogether.

Research Methodology and Rationale

Auto-ethnography was selected as the methodology for this research as it allows for 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 by sharing highly intimate experiences. The results of this research are intended to inform a broader understanding of how community leadership skills are fostered, whereby my personal experiences are representative of a larger group.

The act of introspection throughout the research process has offered opportunities to: grow the understanding I have of myself; recognize and appreciate the contributions I make in community; 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 of myself 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 goals 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). Situated as a leader 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 intense study of individual accounts, privileging self through autobiographical and narrative methods similar to auto-ethnography, they were not selected for use in this research project. 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 as it: considers culture, context, time, and place; values personal stories as representative samples of a larger group and use these stories as a basis for understanding a particular phenomenon; makes use of personal experience as data to inform research efforts (Adult Education Department, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2008).

Research Methods

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, and 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 reflections on critical incidents, with one reflection representing each of the following categories: snapshots, artifacts, and metaphor (Muncey, 2005). The selection of items to reflect upon were identified as I completed an autobiographical reconstruction based upon 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 the past 10 years

- **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 writing and work formulation

Reflection Panels. To help focus my attention while reflecting, individual panels were created for each period examined. Each panel collected the elements selected from the above categories in one location to help in centering thinking about 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; the influence of culture, society, and politics on my development of a leader; and to understand to what extent these experiences were shaped by

place, I drew from Mitchell and Coltrinari's (2001) questions for reflective writing. Questions were selected across the types of metacognitive, descriptive, analytic, evaluative, and reconstructive; and comprised of individual questions related to: description, place-based consideration, those suited for reflecting upon specific elements, and what they offered in terms of flexibility for interpretation and adaptation (see Appendix B for the guiding questions used).

Research Results. 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 reflections 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 in 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 surrounded by quotation marks."*

Data Analysis

Analysis of data 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, participating in a discussion of findings and highlighting emerging themes. Data analysis commenced after all reflections were created. Although Glesne (2006), Lichtman, and 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.

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, based on my understanding of academic concepts and 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 under each research question—to highlight emerging themes. This dual approach provided the foundation for a comprehensive examination of the data, and to help ensure that the emerging themes best reflected the findings.

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 represented of the data that were not initially

considered. **Step 5. Revisiting categories** – all categories were then reconsidered, to: combine those that were similar, including the creation of sub-categories; split complex ideas into multiple areas; eliminate 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; highlight similarities and differences between the periods; identify specific characteristics of each period. A similar matrix was created to map all of the categories in relation to the research questions. This aided in understanding what findings may answer each question, and in identifying larger, emerging themes from the data.

      Interpretation. 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. And, 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 too considered to help in connecting adult education concepts to the community development landscape.

Trustworthiness

      Undertaking an auto-ethnography required myself to be vulnerable, honest, and intense in the practice of self-reflection. Given the personal nature of auto-ethnographic processes it was essential for me to take the steps necessary to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. To help with: reliability—my credibility as a narrator; validity—to evoke a lifelike feeling within

readers; generalizability—making my shared experiences relatable 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; examining a summary of the reflections to help identify any misunderstandings, 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).

Research Ethics

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 that other individuals are always 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 individual other than myself were made in such way to retain their anonymity. Mentions of anonymous individual 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.

Presentation of Data and 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, motivations; and 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 such as: learning through experiences; reflecting on/in action; valuing relationships; developing as a leader; 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 work products, actions, and roles of responsibility which share similar characteristics of a given leadership style or type of role. The sections which follow characterize the periods of: 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 and leadership efforts. 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 skillsets. 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:

> *"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 were primarily self-motivated and could be characterized as both highly individualized and narrow in focus. Often ignorant of external factors, 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 intrinsic 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, driving my work was a personal need to take actions with short-term rewards and personal gains.

I struggled to identify purpose in both my life and work. Because of this, I was looking to boost my ego and build a sense of esteem though my work. Looking back, it is clearer to see 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 way 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 responsible to a governing board of directors, while other times I was engaged with a team of colleagues completing contracted work. The roles I

held 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, an emphasis was on my contributions within 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 became developed due to the roles and reporting structures I was in:

> *"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 and respected, "...*that I value competency, trust, and respect as characteristics of leadership, above all else,"* and 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; or 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 I had to tend to my 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 that that 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 realized how important it is for an individual to dedicate the time, energy, and resources to developing their self, and practice. My time as a Non-Leader was focused on personal development, and the clarity of skills and purpose. This was intentional to help improve my wellbeing, better understand what was most important to me, while strengthening my practice. 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 into.*" Taking this action offered the necessary time and space to focus on my practice, however, it created 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 and my practice:

> "*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. Distancing 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), an action also common when I was 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. 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 grow an understanding of myself, and of my 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 became apparent. These findings spanned across the three periods, with similarities and differences being identified from among the experiences captured. What follows is a summary of these findings which serves as a basis for a discussion of findings and the identification of 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 this field and easily accessible:

> "*... 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 path provided by others; I had little interest, focus, or concern

for taking ownership over my own learning. I recognized this, 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"* but never showed a significant level of interest for my learning. However, in the periods which followed, my mindset and approach would change.

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 was not in alignment with reality, as the learning I was experiencing related to my day-to-day work was not necessarily where I felt I should have been 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."*

Coming to appreciate where I needed to invest my attention lead to a recognition that I should be selecting which environments to situate myself within to support the type of individual growth I was hoping to achieve. I began to appreciate the value of context in terms of learning.

Progressing 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 was most often within a classroom setting and lacked the necessary context to give it meaning. As I left formal education systems, and began to contribute in the

work force, it became apparent that learning related to my work 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 time 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 engaging and valuable was my openness to learn from them. As a Civic Activist, I often only engaged in activities which were relatively easy, lacked significant conflict, and those 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 began 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 tensions, difficult decisions, and challenges provided the greatest potential for learning. *"Easy does not build skill,"* was a term I returned to time and time again. Driving this openness to experiences was an acceptance of myself and willingness to be vulnerable; learning to be adaptable in times of adversity.

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

Reflecting on/in Action. My appreciation for, and act of engaging with 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 individualized and immature, and 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 entries such as: *"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 my growth. This process often included journaling and reviewing previous work. I began to recognize that intentional reflection, as work was being completed 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. This level of appreciation further grew as a Non-Leader, insomuch as I dedicated more time and space to the at of 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 the act of reflection. The input I received from others helped me to better understand myself as an individual and my contributions to those valuable relationships.

Valuing Relationships. Over time, transitioning from one period to the next, I began to better appreciate the value which relationships create in my practice. Recognizing relationships as a necessity in life does seem rather elementary. However, given that both the Civic Activist and Non-Leader periods of work had me completing individualized work, and distancing myself from relationships, this realization was an important one to come to.

As a Civic Activist, I realized that relationships are valuable to help establish a sense of identity and build a sense of belonging. Not able to articulate this clearly at the time, I made observations that led way 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 ... 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 more 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 develop specific 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 that relationships provided me varied depending on what my basic needs were in a given moment. As a Formal Leader, relationships were primarily in support of achieving organizational based goals: *"collectively coming together to identify, and achieve common goal;"* those formed as both a Civic Activist and Non-Leader were to help limit solitude: *"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 was also realized was the importance of how a person establishes relationships, the different types of relationships, and the quality of the relationships themselves.

As my practice progressed, I began to recognize the value of different types of relationships. That value of 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 my 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 learning to assign different value to the various relationships we are a part of, I also recognize the need to establish a balance in how we attend to ourselves as well as others. As my professional practice evolved as a Formal Leader, there was greater balance between being attentive to myself and the collectives I was a part of. Emphasis was placed on balancing both participants in the relationships, my needs, and those of others:

> *"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 began to appreciate the importance of attending to one's self, and the 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."*

This emphasis, on the importance of relationships, seemed to be central to my understanding of leadership and place. As I could not have been a leader without people to follow me—or for me to serve—leadership appeared to be a highly relational concept to me. Similarly, the meaning central to defining place for myself, as opposed to geographic areas void of meaning, may have been found most often within the relationships developed and nurtured in given locations.

Developing as a Leader. As my career progressed and I began to appreciate 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, that *"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 as a Formal Leader, whose communities I was not a part of, where I felt *"like a foreigner in my own role, never really connected to, or engaged with those I was tasked to serve."* At the time, 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 with an understanding that actions speak louder than words, being motivated by *"others who are taking the steps necessary to improve things, however they see fit;"* then, as a Form Leader, identifying the leadership characteristics often missing from purely management roles, I valued *"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; that there are many who are invested in their home;"*—a less black and white distinction between management and leadership began to appear in front of me. Whereby 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 do not necessarily come with power, led way to recognizing that leaders exist within the context of a broader collective, or the relationships that they are a part of—that someone is assigned the title or role of a leader in the eyes 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 throughout my practice which resonated most often 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, to one of participation and non-leadership. Serving others as a supportive colleague in the workplace or playing the part of participant in daily community activities; these were common roles I assumed as a Non-Leader. Characterized by 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, to help others recognize what may be important in a community, was one way I chose to quietly lead. Similarly, as a Formal Leader, while tasked with implementing community development efforts, I chose to push others into the spotlight as to give them credit for their contributions: "*... 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 in the process, sacrificing an opportunity to recognize my own strengths and abilities.

The experiences from these two periods of practice are contrasted against my time 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."*

During this period of my life, I thought that leaders needed to be at the forefront of all work and action. While this is certainly the case in any situations, this is not always the case. The way I was working during this period was not in alignment with a servant focused practice, and the collective understanding of leadership I would develop in later years.

Becoming a leader also meant having situational awareness. Developed throughout my career, I more fully appreciated this in later years, I became 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.

      Understandings of Place. Early in my career, as a Civic Activist, I did not fully appreciate the importance or meaning of place. Working individually, I lacked formal connection to a specific space to work from, and to 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 develop 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 which working from a dedicated space can have on 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 idea of place. The space I was working from was not directly located in the places I was tasked with influencing, and 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 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 learning environments may not always support learning in every individual, was supported in noting that some spaces can be restrictive for the purposes of learning based on both 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 practice there was 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 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. The result was finding myself more and more often in Third Places—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." Third places allowed for me to feel a level of comfort, and a sense of belonging, by simply occupying spaces with others, without the responsibilities or commitments required of more formal relationships.

In considering my experiences, an appreciation can be formed of how the learning that happens within community 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 for a clearer understanding to be realized of the role place has supporting learning and leadership development.

Discussion of Findings & Emerging Themes

The findings of this auto-ethnography are given meaning through the questions which guide the research (see Research Questions), and the literature which situates it amongst broader scholarly discussions. In revealing significant findings amongst the data, a series of themes emerge. 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, all collectively begin to answer 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 relationships have on their development may directly influence their ability to become a leader in community. Schweigert suggests, "[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 understand 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 the leader / follower relationship hierarchy, with the leader at the bottom. The work of Brookfield and Preskill (2009) support this view, in 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 actions of management (Hanold, 2015; Schweigert, 2007); whereby, the leader is positioned at the top, and follower at the bottom, of the same hierarchy. In recognizing how leaders and followers relate to one another, and how this relationship shapes the meaning of leadership, the impact and importance of power structures becomes apparent.

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 by thoughts from Coady (1939), Kretzman and McKnight (1993), and Mathie and Cunningham (2008), Wheatley (2009) advocates for speaking about leadership—and power—in terms of a collective mindset rather than focusing on individuals to increase the likelihood of a community realizing its full potential. As such, 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). In recognizing that anyone can be a leader, community members must recognize how they support one another and acknowledge 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, "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 for 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 challenging feedback that can be received from others, and using this difficult space 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 they provide may be detrimental to the development of leaders. An individual should balance the time spent in both comfortable and uncomfortable 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 of community development—leading through learning, may best support Margaret Wheatley's (2009) vision of leadership—that anyone can be a leader. Developing this idea further, if being curious is a characteristic which leaders exhibit, 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 on conversations 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 the value of reflection and how it can impact professional practice is an important lesson for any leader to learn. This responsibility is one that leaders are not absolved from participating in (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. Keeping journals, documents, and artifacts can present mechanisms to capture thoughts, actions, and choices in the moment—reflection in action, and provide opportunities to review and reflect upon them after the fact—reflection on action (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 amongst practitioners. 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). By practicing intentional, collective critical reflection, that which Brookfield and Preskill (2009), Mündel and Schugurensky (2008), and Shor (1992) are all advocates for, individual perspectives can be brought together for the common good to increase the empowerment of both individuals and collectives.

Openly soliciting feedback from others and having some type of structure to process their views—constructively—can provide leaders often overlooked perspectives to aid in their growth and development (Luft & Harrington, 1955). 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 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 the act of reflection (Brown, 2015).

The suggestion from Freire (1970), hooks (1994), and Shor (1992) that teachers can grow and be empowered, but only if they allow themselves to be vulnerable while working with learners, applies similarly 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 begins to shape their identity as an individual, 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) recognize the interconnectedness between individuals and their

collectives being essential for feeling a sense of belonging in community. However, simply relating to others may not be enough for leaders.

An individual must participate within a community 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 formal leadership roles, other members may select non-participation, out of public view, as a way to contribute. Taking a less-public approach to participation can aid in shaping one's position in community and their overall identity. When considering the development of leaders within community, participation becomes even more essential. As leaders are likely to be "of the place" (Mathie & Gaventa, 2015, p. 13), a position advocated by Freire (1970) and Wheatley (2009) alike, the idea that leadership is relational too impacts how an individual's participation shapes the way which 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—that individuals are shaped by spaces, primarily through their interactions with others. While an individual may develop their own personal connection to space, often developing a sense of place, these connections may only be given 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 develop 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 remain foreigners in the spaces they occupy.

Place is Constructed Through Understanding

The role place plays in developing the skills essential for leading communities 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 itself. Supporting thoughts on the importance of relationships 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 placing an emphasis to relationships, may be one way to interpret the meaning Johnson (2012) was interested in when deconstructing this complex term.

While specific environments may prove to be a container for unique activities to unfold within—learning, relationship building, community development etc.—the actual level of importance a space has for the understanding of place may be relatively little in comparison to other elements. What may be more important in creating an individual understanding of place are: 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—"task, time, team, and technique" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 147) to dedicate to learning, growth, and development; relationships—establishing a network of peers to support personal growth (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Mathie & Gaventa, 2015; Tschaepe, 2013). These elements may provide the necessary combination of resources to help an individual develop a holistic understanding of their experiences, what meaning they contain, and ultimately their role 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 may become increasingly important as individuals are less tied to geographic communities, and form around communities 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.

Significance of Research

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 skills essential to lead in community, and 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 around. 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), this research offers a conceptualization which elaborates on what may constitute a place, the value it can provide, and the meaning it can generate:

> 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; an individual openness to the resources and mechanisms available to help individuals deconstruct the relationships and experiences they share with both people and spaces.

Learning experiences embedded within community development efforts have the potential to impact the likely hood 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); approaches their work with a sense of curiosity and an open mind (Kolb, 1984; Lindeman, 1982).

Spaces in 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. In using these findings from my own experiences as a leader, I hope others can identify how similar skills can be fostered amongst 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.

Conclusion, Implications, and 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 what role place plays in this process.

By interpreting the data generated through autobiographical reconstruction and reflective journaling, 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 through reflecting on my experiences as a practicing Civic Activist, Formal Leader,

and Non-Leader, helped to inform an appreciation of what learning experiences within community can support the development of leaders. In understanding how I develop leadership skills the hope is that other professionals can identify how similar skills can be fostered in 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 growth of 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 is best suited for, may be less important in terms of the value space can provide. More important may be the modes and mechanisms for reflection; availability of time, energy, and focus; and networks of peers to support individual 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 to expand the understanding 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 reviewed which informed this research. Further research into the importance of space and place, for learning and leading within community, should 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's still finished the project — 365 pictures strong — but said he relied on online followers to keep

> "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

him motivated.

It's not only Van Lierop taking to the Internet for public yearlong 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, information and technoculture, is determined to watch 365 movies in 365 days and post about them online.

"When you put that kind of term on it, 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 habits. 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 it to an extreme," he says.

While Van Lierop still searches for his passion, he hopes others will take on a similar challenge to push their limits 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.

2011-06-29

September 4, 2011
Forest City Gallery
258 Richmond St London, ON N6B 2H7
42.979321, -81.247227

"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."
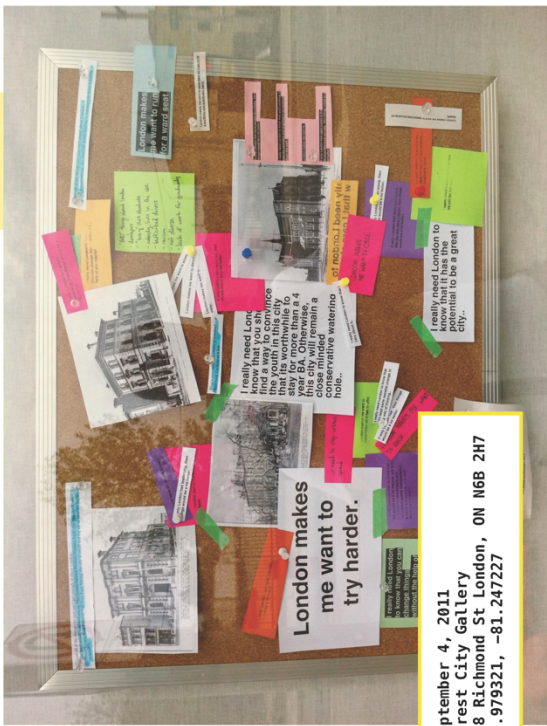
— Ashley Baxter

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.

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 an 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 much 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

<u>"Passive adventuring ..... Is an art form" The Art of Wandering - pg.199</u>

...

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

2016 – Libro Growing Prosperity Award – Nomination

I would like to nominate Kevin Van Lierop for the Growing Prosperity Award. Kevin's passion for community development is absolutely outstanding and his community-minded focus was apparent from my first meeting with him. For more than a decade, Kevin has been on a journey to build prosperity in his local community. His personal mission is to create better places for people to live and call home through fostering citizen engagement and promoting development in the London region. With only 600 words, I'll try my best to be succinct with the lengthy list of examples showing why he is very deserving of this award! As part of the London Strengthening Neighbourhoods Strategy, Kevin spearheaded a campaign called 'The Little Gems' to highlight the great things about London's neighbourhoods. The campaign invited the community to share the things that make London special and the submissions were plotted on an online map to help people find and discover London's 'little gems'. The submission that received the most likes was awarded with a $5,000 grant towards a neighbourhood enhancement. In 2013 Kevin was presented with the Young Alumni Award from King's University College for his outstanding achievements in community service and professional accomplishments. He was also awarded the Michael Barrington Hall Award from Fanshawe College. Kevin also received recognition as a keynote speaker for London Youth Council, and as an Ambassador for Tech Alliance. Kevin has or currently sits on a number of boards and committees including the marketing committee for Museum London, board member of Forest City Gallery, Urban League of London, and UnLondon Digital Media Association, director for London Short Film Showcase, social media documentarian for LOLA fest, co-organizer for Hack the Vote, founding member of Our Street London, and member of the citizen Engagement Task Force with the City of London...whew! Kevin excels in taking on community projects with limited resources and he always emphasizes that a positive attitude and willingness to make personal connections goes a long way. Even much of Kevin's professional experience consists of community development work including roles with Emerging Leaders, LondonFuse New Media Collective, and community engagement for the Southwest Economic Alliance. Kevin's most recent community project is the creation of a 'Block Party in a Box' kit. The kit encourages Londoners to get to know their neighbours, a small gesture which Kevin believes is the key to all innovation. The kit has been successful beyond London and is helping communities across the world to become engaged and connected. In his short time with Libro, Kevin's been involved in many of our community initiatives including fundraising for MS Bike, volunteering for Boys and Girls Club and United Way, and supporting The Prosperity Project. With his long-time commitment, his passion for volunteerism, and his genuine 'Big Heart', he's truly an inspiration and model Libro employee who's deserving of the Growing Prosperity Award.

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?

  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**

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

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

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

- o 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?

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

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

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

- o What does this experience teach me about myself?

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

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

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

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

- o 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?

- o What could I do differently next time?

- o What leverage do I have to make changes?

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

- o What should I continue to do?

- o What should I do differently?

- o 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?

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

- o Where could I go for new ideas?