St. Francis Xavier University

Journey from Antigonish:
Thoughts on Self-Directed Learning, Reflective Practice, and Personal Growth

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Reflective Learning Evaluation

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This reflective learning evaluation shares thoughts regarding my learning and growth while a student in Saint Francis Xavier University's Master of Adult Education program. Consideration is given to my personal learning over a three-year period in relation to the research I conducted and the acts of reflective practice I completed. This evaluation is an attempt to understand myself as a learner, the influence my research has on the contributions I make within the field of adult education, and how my professional practice has evolved as a result.

Foundations Institute

Upon arriving in Antigonish, Nova Scotia at the beginning of this program I did not fully comprehend the journey I was about to embark upon. While I prepared in the weeks prior by reading some literature and writing basic reflections, I had little direction for my actions. I soon came to realize, while at the Foundations Institute, that I did not know myself all that well as an individual or learner, or how large of a field of study adult education is. My initial experiences were moments of vulnerability, honesty, and the sharing of deeply personal feelings with strangers. I found myself to be, "the man in the arena" (Brown, 2015, p. 247)—having the courage to be vulnerable without knowing it while taking small, initial steps towards transforming who I am as an individual. Sharing these feelings through a bridging exercise (see Appendix A – Bridging Visualisation), and in conversations with peers and faculty, I began to learn more about what I wanted to take away from this program. I quickly realized that the research I would end up completing would be a small component of my three-year journey.

Returning to academic studies after seven years away from formal education was both a challenge and the easiest thing to do. Easy, because as a curious and motivated individual I am always interested in learning and determined to finish what I begin. Challenging, because I was not certain if graduate studies were for me or if this program was the right fit. Now, as I near the

end of this program, I understand it is the unique combination of elements which make this program well-suited for me. As a learner, the reflective practice components of this program help me to appreciate who I am, how I learn, and what my needs are. As an educator, the body of knowledge I consume provides context in uncovering the reasons why and how I choose to engage with learners, and what beliefs provide motivation for my practice. And, as a professional, my work in this program and the feedback it has solicited have identified where my strengths lie and the areas of my practice where there are ongoing opportunities for growth.

Learning Plan

Re-reading the learning plan I wrote while at the Foundations Institute is an interesting experience in of itself. Recalling my state of mind at the time, and the impetus for what I selected to include, offers a starting point to compare and contrast against what thoughts I have today. By considering the initial learning intents I established, how they changed over time, and the challenges I have overcome, I am able to better appreciate myself as a learner. This awareness aids in focusing my attention for personal growth, academic purposes, and professional practice.

Learning Intents

Prior to beginning this program, my specific learning goals were related to becoming a more capable teacher, strengthening community leadership roles, and developing a better understanding of my skills and abilities. More broadly, I was interested in understanding why I feel connected to certain learning environments over others, and how the experiences within these spaces contribute to my growth. While this larger goal has not changed, as I progress through this program the specific objectives I set for myself have. Through the acts of conversing with classmates, reading relevant literature, and participating in reflective activities, I identified

learning goals which provided greater value than my initial intents. These goals are related to: developing confidence, confronting self-doubt, feeding an insatiable curiosity, and seeking out challenges. Over the past three years I have focused on becoming confident in academic reading, synthesizing what I consume and articulating my thoughts through structured writing. This increase in confidence has transferred to my professional practice as I interact with others and lead projects to improve community and educational practices. Thought I have always been capable of having a confidence mindset, historically my self-doubt was all encompassing and I was unable to appreciate the full scope of my abilities. This feeling has shifted as I complete each program component. I now recognize that I am wholly responsible for, and capable of, whatever I set my mind to. I am thankful that this program has allowed me to continue to be curious about topics I am interested in while providing opportunities for me to focus my attention. In being more intentional while exploring my curiosity I have focused on activities which are most likely to benefit my personal growth.

Challenges

As I advance through this program, I come across ongoing opportunities for learning and self-growth. However, making progress has not been without challenges. Over the past 18-months I have needed to remain focused on the research topic I outlined while at the Foundations Institute. Given that curiosity often leads to my mind wandering, I was aware of the need to not deviate too far from my initial intentions as doing so could lead to lost time, require additional work, and contribute to me feeling overwhelmed. Staying on task has proven to be an essential component to fulfilling my learning contract. In comparing the results of my research project to the concept I began with, I am satisfied that I have met my initial intentions while allowing my work to evolve over time to reflect a refined version of the topic I began with.

The larger of the challenges I face relates to the feedback and criticism I receive. Receiving criticism has always proven to be an uncomfortable task. However, I now have strategies to accept, make sense of, and incorporate feedback into my work. Until recently, I would often perceive feedback as a personal attack. What I have come to realize is that feedback within this program strives to improve my work, not put it down. While receiving feedback can be challenging, it is essential to support my growth and has been an important element in helping me to improve my abilities and practice. Given that those whom I enlist to support me have my best interest in mind, I must also trust that their feedback aims to encourage me, push me, and help elevate both myself and my practice. Although I am still learning to successfully integrate feedback into my practice, I recognize the value it can provide in strengthening my work and improving how effective I am in serving others as an educator and leader.

Supports

To overcome challenges, I have surrounded myself with individuals and resources which keep me on track and remind me of the importance of this field of work. Those closest to me— my partner, and a colleague in my workplace—offer motivation, encouragement, and feedback which helps as I navigate the ups and downs of graduate studies. They highlight blind spots (Luft & Harrington, 1955) amongst my personal reflections, help me to understand the feedback I receive, and push me away from easy paths and towards those which provide challenges and opportunities for growth. Academic supports are provided by my program advisor, Dr. Carole Roy, and a faculty member at the institution where I work. These individuals encourage me to create a higher calibre of work, pushing me beyond areas of comfort and towards work which reflects what I am capable of achieving. Given these individuals complete research of their own while supporting students, I have come to value the perspectives, wisdom, and expertise they

share. Helping me to understand the process of research, these advisors highlight areas of strength in my work—the quality of my writing, and ability to synthesize and summarize texts with relative ease; while identifying parts of the research process where I still have room for growth—to write in fewer generalities, and to be more specific with my analysis and interpretation of research findings. I am forever indebted to these advisors and all others who give so much in support of my ongoing development.

In addition to support from individuals, I find myself periodically returning to two works: *We Make the Road By Walking* (1990) by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, and *Masters of Their Own Destiny* (1939) by Moses Coady. These resources provide guidance and help to ground my practice. Horton and Freire, through their engaging conversational style, provided my initial introduction to adult education and its relationships to community development. Coady's seminal work established the necessary historical context for me to appreciate the connections I feel to co-operative based organizations and movements. Together, these works have reminded me that individuals and groups who feel the need to alter the conditions of their lives and communities have the power to make a significant difference. In re-reading these books, I am reassured that it is the basic ways we connect with others, through conversations, social settings, and in collaboration, which offer the resources for us to learn and take action together, to improve the communities we have a collective responsibility to look after. Considering how I learn best, when information is made relevant through tangible action, it seems fitting that the principles of adult education which Horton and Freire, and Coady were all advocates for would resonate with me. This resonance helps to shape my practice, learning, and how I choose to engage with others.

Self-Directed Learning

While I would classify myself as a self-motivated individual, I often find myself avoiding the work that is most likely to provide the greatest opportunity for growth. During this program I have often considered the easiest of paths in terms of the direction I set for myself. A force of habit to select work I know I am capable of achieving and nothing more, I have nearly missed opportunities to complete more rewarding and fulfilling, yet difficult work. Thanks to conversations with trusted individuals, in conjunction with acts of reflection, while in this program I have regularly selected work that is more challenging, engaging, uncomfortable, and likely to develop areas where I am lacking. Even as a self-directed learner, I have come to recognize the need to have a strong support system. As Knowles, Horton III, and Swanson note, supporters such as educators and advisors can, "enable each individual to achieve his or her full and unique potential" (2005, p. 260), and in my case, push me beyond what I think I am capable of. I am forever indebted to those who push me beyond my comfort zone, for they know it makes me a truer version of myself. While the learning itself may be self-directed, the process of self-directed learning is anything but a journey an individual takes on their own.

Learning Program Design Phase

Upon returning home from the Foundations Institute I felt energized by what I accomplished in Antigonish. However, I understood that to maintain my enthusiasm I needed to form habits and learning strategies. I quickly established a space in my home specifically for completing program related work (see Appendix B – Home Office). Just as quickly as I created this space, I recognized that a sterile office was not the best environment for me to work from. While not a surprise, it was not until I had a defined space within my own home that I was able to identify the types of environments where I complete my best work. I soon abandoned my

home office in exchange for spending time at libraries, and on-campus at local post-secondary institutions. These Third Spaces (Oldenberg, 1999) offer a social element to my learning and allow me to recreate the feeling of being on campus in Antigonish surrounded by books, knowledge, and other learners. Recalling my writings at the Foundations Institute on the history of public libraries, I simply could have headed directly to my local branch of the public library and forewent the creation of a home office altogether.

The integration of new responsibilities such as reading, research preparation, and academic writing were all challenging experiences for me. I had not previously invested myself in a task as important or daunting as this program while working concurrently in full-time employment. In the past, I would give priority to employment over my studies when the two happened simultaneously. With this program, I wanted to prioritize my academic work. I began to evaluate what was most important in terms of my personal, professional, and extracurricular commitments, and removed from my daily activities the elements that did not support my goals. Establishing a balance amongst commitments became increasingly important as I crafted my professional portfolio and transitioned into the literature review process.

Professional Portfolio

While I never thought the process of dissecting and reflecting upon my professional practice would be easy, I could have never imagined that it would be this difficult. As someone who would rather not be the centre of attention, focusing so much on myself required more mental and physical energy than I have invested previously into a single activity, certainly any academic related task (Van Lierop, 2017b).

The result of investing attention, time, and energy into my professional portfolio was a clearer understanding of who I am as a practitioner, my actions and accomplishments, and an

appreciation of what motivates me. Prior to completing the portfolio, I did not have the language needed to convey the broader value which my practice offers, although I was able to speak about individual pieces of work on their own. This exercise helped me to build confidence in myself and recognize the value of my efforts. As a result, I now have a more robust vocabulary with which I can articulate my approach to adult education, community development, and leadership.

Feedback from my advisor offered opportunities for learning and improvement. Intended to help me develop future work, I took the feedback received and wrote a letter to future students highlighting my learning (Van Lierop, 2017a). As my portfolio was rather lengthy, this letter recognized that any student, researcher, or practitioner should be intentional in selecting what elements to include in their work. This understanding helped me to focus my writing as I completed the other components of this program. I suggested that future students identify who it is they are creating their portfolio for. Whether it be an audience of academics, professionals, or simply their advisor, knowing one's audience can provide purpose when writing. Lastly, I suggested that an individual should write with purpose and confidence. Although expertise in a subject area only develops with time and experience, what better subject to practice writing as an expert than about one's own history, experiences, and life. The result of writing confidently can be a compelling narrative which clearly communicates one's story, research, and perspective. As an ongoing skill that can always be improved, I now understand that writing confidently is an important ability for any individual to master.

Literature Review

The term, literature review, has always conveyed to me a scary, daunting task that seemed overwhelming and unattainable by myself. Having not previously completed a literature review, I did not know what to expect and had ill-informed assumptions about the process.

However, upon completing the literature review I realized that most of these feeling and assumptions were unfounded. In fact, if I consider all the elements of this academic program, the literature review is one of the components I most thoroughly enjoyed. As I read the work of academics, professionals, and community leaders I found myself immersed in a body of knowledge I had previously unexplored. Each time I finished an article or book I was left with many more items that I wanted to digest. Although I enjoyed reading items which affirmed my existing beliefs, I found myself most connected to the literature which challenged my abilities as a graduate student in the language used, and the items which exposed me to alternative perspectives. I appreciated the opportunity to engage with the literature at my own pace, to better understand the arguments at hand and the varying pieces of evidence which supported or negated the claims made. It was during this phase, when I was becoming exposed to the existing literature and knowledge, that I found myself most engaged in the process of research.

In completing the literature review I was able to better understand and appreciate the connection between adult education and community development, and how both fields are integrated into to my life and practice. I came to appreciate the various notions of power—how it is distributed, manifests itself in relationships, and the actions I take as a result of the power I have. I have established a larger vocabulary from which to speak about the essence of leadership, community, place, the interactions power has within these areas, and the ways which individuals can grow through informal learning activities. A result of having a more robust vocabulary to draw from is that I now feel more adequately prepared to speak about myself as a leader, and in turn feeling greater confidence in the roles I assume and the work I complete.

Research Project

As one of my classmates would say, "the research component of this program was always the carrot." Completing all of the components which came before, this part of the process was an opportunity to connect a professional topic of interest to the field of adult education. However, for some of us—including me—the research never ended up being "the carrot" initially anticipated. While informative and educational, I am not certain what I ended up learning from the process reflects what I had expected, or that the process itself is what I most enjoyed about this program. What follows are thoughts on the research project process and what I learned about the field of adult education and myself as both learner and practitioner.

Framing the Research

The research I chose to complete formed from an interest in understanding what types of learning experiences are most likely to foster the development of community leadership skills, and to what extent *place* shapes this process. Using my own experiences as the primary source of data, focusing on distinct leadership roles over a ten-year period, I sought to answer the question: "How have learning experiences embedded within community development efforts impacted my leadership skill development?" Taking the shape of an auto-ethnography, where data collection was conducted through a series of reflective accounts which formed an autobiographical reconstruction, the research aimed 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.

Project Design

As I moved through the motions of identifying my academic interests and limiting the scope of my research to make it achievable, I found myself engrossed in the process of selecting an appropriate methodology and the methods under which the research would unfold. I enjoyed the process of continually refining the research project and integrating the ongoing feedback from my peers and advisor. The portions of the process which fed the analytical approach I take to most of the work I complete included: building the initial structure upon which the research would form, and understanding the rationale for the research itself. With that said, the project design phase was not easy. Receiving comments from my peers, the online Moodle instructor, and two different academic advisors created challenges when it came to balancing and integrating feedback. Every individual brings their own experience and existing knowledge to reviewing another's work. This breadth of perspectives transpired as a series of different understandings of what my project was meant to be, and differing opinions on what it should be. As a result, I found myself re-writing my proposal on an ongoing basis to help clarify my intentions. More often than not, I was articulating what my project was not rather than what it was. I eventually came to the realization that while each individual will have their own opinion of my work it is my sole responsibility to take their feedback and shape my research as I see fit. In coming to terms with the fact that a piece of research will never satisfy every reader, I recognize the need for me to be comfortable with my own research, insomuch as I can defend my choices while articulating the reasoning behind the research and the value I believe it provides.

Implementation Phase

When the time came to transfer my project design into actual research I found myself facing a pair of challenges. First, in completing an auto-ethnography structured upon a series of

reflections I came to fully appreciate that reflective activities are hard. While I arrived at this same conclusion while completing my Professional Portfolio, this realization was multiplied during the implementation phase of my research. In using my own experiences as the primary source of data, once I finished my reflective activities I found myself alone with my own thoughts for the remainder of the research project. This differed from the Professional Portfolio insomuch as, once the portfolio was finished I could ignore it for as long as I needed to. This issue led way to the larger challenge—that being both a researcher and subject at the same time is extremely difficult. Remaining objective, understanding what role I was in at any given moment, and knowing when and how to step out of a specific role to re-frame my perspective, were all tasks I struggled with. Although I did not realize it early enough in the process— although it was suggested to me as one possible approach I could have taken—I came to appreciate that working with another individual, to interview me as a means of data generation, may have helped to separate the roles of researcher and subject. As I contemplate the route which I took in completing my auto-ethnography, I return to a thought I had earlier in this evaluation, that "while the learning itself may be self-directed, the process of self-directed learning is anything but a journey an individual takes on their own." I now recognize that even with a self-focused methodology, such as an auto-ethnography, there is always need to engage with others throughout the process as they can offer various means of support and perspective.

Intents, Purpose and Takeaways

As I came across challenges during the research process, I found myself developing strategies to help meet my learning intents and research purpose. I recognized that if I did not remain on topic the scope of my project could quickly expand. Any large increase in project scope would lead to wasted time and the results of my research could reflect a lack of focus. As

someone who is naturally curious, I needed to stay on task to balance priorities across personal, professional, and academic endeavours. While staying on topic, I made an honest effort to research and act outside of my comfort zone in order to grow as an individual. I found myself taking an approach to my research—completing an auto-ethnography—which was beyond the type of action I would have previously considered. Similarly, knowing that in the past I have sought out information which helps to confirm what I already believe, part of working outside my comfort zone was to find the perspectives and voices of others who may offer contrasting views and beliefs. This approach included welcoming feedback from peers, colleagues and, advisors; and thoughts from the literature I consumed. In considering voices other than my own, I can view through a window—Johari's, if I choose to name it (Luft & Harrington, 1955)—to catch a glimpse of who I am and the essence of my practice. A result of being open to feedback are voices other than my own which have my best interest in mind and want to see me grow. Perhaps most important, is recognizing that I will only ever become exposed to a small portion of the available knowledge on a topic. That, no matter how much I study I will know relatively little. This realization, that there are limits to one's ability to obtain and retain knowledge, has offered a necessary perspective to help focus the purpose behind the actions I take, and to direct where I choose to invest my time, energy, and expertise.

In naming the actions taken to help achieve my learning goals I realize that I may have not achieved what I initially set out to learn. When I look back at the specific goals identified in my learning contact and compare those to what I feel my greatest learnings are, I am not certain that I have begun to scratch the surface of my initial intents. The question then becomes, "why is this the case?" The deviation in my intentions and goals likely changed due to the reflective components of this program which directed me to assign greater weight to learning about myself rather than a specific area of adult education. I quickly became comfortable with this refined

purpose, as learning about one's self is an act of adult education in of itself. When considering my research, the area I chose to focus on remained connected to my initial intents and provided a point of entry as I began to understand a vast area of knowledge. I imagine that like many students, I was not fully aware of how narrow of a scope the research would require to be wholly manageable and valuable at the same time. When considering all program elements together, the research component, while significant, only accounts for a small portion of the time and energy invested. Meaning, that while my initial research intentions were relatively focused, they still needed to be refined and narrowed. Looking back, the area of research interest I settled on was perhaps still too broad given the amount of time and available in this program to focus on it.

Key Learnings. In working through the research process, I identified the types of work I enjoy more than others, and those which I may be better suited for. Beginning with the literature review and continuing on through the project design phase, I most enjoyed establishing and framing the research more than the research itself. While my curiosity for learning new things likely had some influence in connecting me to specific portions of the process, the methodology and methods I selected enhanced a feeling of disconnection to the acts of implementation. I was well over the writing about, re-reading, and analyzing my experiences by the time the implementation phase was complete. In my proposal, I warned myself that completing an auto-ethnography can be both challenging and emotional, however I did not realize to what extent this would be the case. Looking back, if I could work through the process again, I would select a different methodology or methods. Conducting a case study which focuses on leaders other than myself, or integrating more structured support from trusted individuals into the auto-ethnographic process; either of these approaches could have yielded different, and perhaps stronger, research results compared to those I did achieve. In terms of professional practice, completing the research process helped me to appreciate the value a methodical approach can

bring to work while being aware of the need to remain flexible in one's actions. In both research and professional practice there is a need to be nimble when it comes to carrying out the methods; adjusting activities and plans as work progresses to ensure that the process provides value and works towards achieving the identified outcomes.

When I consider the focus of my research interests: learning in connection to place, community, and leadership, I come to appreciate the broadness of each of these concepts. That place on its own is a vast and a nuanced concept; it is full of meaning, different interpretations, and can have highly individualized understandings. Having worked in the field of urban planning and community development, the term place is often used in a singular context to describe spaces that are created to elicit interactions between citizens. Often forgotten are all of the other spaces that may instigate meaningful interactions amongst individuals, and between an individual and a feeling a sense of place, that may not have been intentionally created for these purposes (Oldenberg, 1999). That community and leadership are available to all; how we choose to define these terms is related to our needs, what we are seeking from our community and leaders, and how we allow ourselves to be shaped by them. And the broadness of learning; the fact that we are always learning, although we cannot always fully realize what it is we are learning within a given moment. Only by giving ourselves time, participating in acts of reflection, and allowing others to connect to our learning, can we begin to understand, appreciate and value the learning which is embedded within our daily experiences. When it comes to the academic learnings related to my research focus, the most important thing I have taken away is that it is impossible to know all—that the knowledge which exists on a given subject is too vast for an individual to comprehend. It may be in the best interest of an individual, learner, or researcher to focus intently on something very specific than to attempt to only learn more broadly.

Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes. In completing the research component of this program, I came to recognize a set of attributes, skills, and knowledge I both developed and strengthened. As a result of this program I find myself trying to more actively and intently integrate the opinions and perspectives of others into my work. This can be challenging as it is easy to remain attached to one's own beliefs and be drawn towards sources which affirm such beliefs. In considering the perspectives of others, practitioners such as I can allow for their opinions and beliefs to be shaped and to become more balanced. When it comes to conducting research, identifying my biases, positionality, existing knowledge, and personal preferences create a lens through which I view my work and help to shape what I create. The need to acknowledge these realities, account for them when possible, and allow for the knowledge, perspectives and opinions of others to shape my work becomes more evident as I continue with the activities of this program and consider future academic endeavours.

While in this program I have developed stronger reading, writing, and planning skills. I continue to enhance existing skills related to the understanding and synthesizing of what I read, including strategies to connect this information back to my practice in such a way that it helps to maintain an ever-evolving praxis. I do recognize that I could further develop skills in the areas of research implementation; how to carry out the initial strategies I identify, and how to adapt methods to guide and shape the research in fulfilling its purpose. Additionally, I can continue to develop the skill and courage, through acts of vulnerability, to ask for help of others both when I know I need it and when I think I do not.

Lastly, I will re-iterate and emphasize that I do not know everything. That even after completing my research I only know a relatively tiny portion of all of the knowledge in the world, and a small portion within a very narrow field of interest. There is always opportunity for an individual to enhance and broaden what they know. Knowledge itself, and wisdom beyond

that, is generated through the collection and interpretation of data, the synthesizing of information, and the combination of these actions. Only by maintaining an ongoing practice, where one continues to seek out answers to the questions which interest them, can they embark on the process of knowledge generation. At this point in my journey, I have learned how to strategically approach learning, established a foundation understanding of both adult education and community development, and have identified resources, language, and supports to continue research and discussions within these areas of study and practice.

Post-Project Phase

When I began in this program, my vocabulary did not include terms like reflection and reflexivity (Bolton, 2014), or reflection in/on action (Schön, 1983). Three years later, such terminology and their associated acts form core components of the work I complete—from crafting a professional portfolio, to the creation of the data set for my research, to this very reflective learning evaluation. If I were to identify a single item of learning that has proven to be most influential in my growth I would highlight acts of reflection. Recognizing this significance, I often find myself returning to these words from Bolton (2014):

> Reflective practice is not narcissistic because rather than falling in love with our own beauty, we bravely face the discomfort and uncertainty of attempting to perceive how things are. We seek to uncover dark corners by asking difficult questions. We reflect in order to try to perceive ourselves with others' eyes (employers, clients, colleagues) to gain a clearer picture (p. 17).

Bolton's words provide the perspective necessary for me to reflect upon my work, helping to ground my thoughts in authenticity. More than any other resource, I have returned to Bolton's thoughts time and time again as a reminder of why reflective practice is important. Although

reflection can conjure up periods of discomfort, it has the power to develop an individual's understanding of themselves in the singular and in relation to the society they are an integral part of. While initially I was not aware of the impact which acts of reflection can have on the development of an individual, I know recognize it as an essential element for personal growth and becoming fully engaged in a practice of self-directed learning.

Further Areas of Inquiry

As I look to the future and what new acts of research, education, and leadership might bring I find myself considering a series of questions to provide focus. As a researcher, I find myself evaluating my abilities in the area of academia. Based on the feedback I receive from peers and advisors, and my own feelings regarding my professional capabilities, I am still processing thoughts surrounding how capable and competent I may be if I were to continue studies which situate me in roles within academia. I am curious about how I can continue to learn more about the areas of interest to me, focusing the time I want on such studies, while balancing other ongoing and competing commitments in life. While I identified strategies to aid me in being successful at balancing commitments over the last three years, I am not certain this process is sustainable and would require some significant changes if I were to focus on academic studies long term. I am curious about how my academic interest may align with the professional settings I find myself working in on a day-to-day basis. On more than one occasion I have asked myself the question, "will those who I work with, and those whom I serve, derive value from my specific personal interests when it comes to learning, community, leadership, and place?" New areas of interest, which bridge my current academic work and my day-to-day professional contributions, include: thoughts surrounding college *as* community—related to the differences between community at smaller regional locations and at larger centralized campuses; and college

in community—concerned with how integrated higher institutions are with the geographic regions they are located within, including the impact of their presence.

Thoughts on Learning

The difference between the roles of student and learner is a thought I have considered more than once during this program. First noted in my submission at the end of the Foundations Institute, and then revisited again as part of my Professional Portfolio, I would like to comment on it once more. Both for my own learning and for those I serve and support as an educator, it is critical to be mindful about the language I choose to use, because "it matters how we call those we teach" (Biesta, 2010). As I wrap up my studies, this view has not changed. In considering the role power has in learning processes, I now appreciate the need to balance power distributions within educational relationships. In acknowledging that learners should, and do, hold a significant amount of power in comparison to their teacher/educator counterparts, my practice can be transformed to assign a greater emphasis to the needs of learners. When I hear the terms teacher and student, I visualize a hierarchy rooted in established organizational structures where the teacher is assigned a role of power, and the student is an empty vessel, much in the same way Freire (1970) describes a banking model of education. If the language used within educational processes is shifted towards educator/learner vocabulary I believe that power begins to be balanced by taking away established norms and understandings of the two roles. However, there is still work to be done. Given that every learner has experiences from which they have established knowledge, and the fact that it is impossible for any educator to know all, there is always something that an individual can learn. Perhaps, we all are simply learners and share in the responsibility to exchange what we know for what others have to offer in reciprocal learner-

to-learner relationships. This thought it full of difficulties and problems, but perhaps it is a beginning point for another future area of inquiry.

Identifying Learning. It can be challenging to recognize if someone has learned a topic until they find themselves needing to apply what they have been taught in practical forms. While in an academic program an individual may have written a paper, passed a test, or delivered a flawless presentation, but have they actually learned? In terms of my own learning, the fact that I have learned is not represented through such assessment tools, but rather in my every day practice. I find myself participating in conversations which have me using language appropriate for specific discussions based on the concepts and research this program has exposed me to. I am more often than not, seeking out new challenges and opportunities to answer questions which extend beyond those I would have asked in the initial stages of this program. I am more curious about the interconnected nature of the characteristics a given challenge exhibits, and less concerned with singular concepts that I would have previously believed were unrelated to others. Most importantly though, as a sign that I have learned while participating in this program, I find myself more willing to recognize the gaps in my own knowledge, the faults in the claims I make, and the limits of who I am as an individual in terms of both what I know and what I am capable of. In seeking out the expertise and support of others in my personal growth I may be exhibiting the fact that I have learned as a result of this program in the best possible way.

Learning Supports. Although I have previously mentioned the role individuals and the support they have given to me while in this program, I wanted to touch specifically on the social element of learning. Prior to participating in this program I did not fully grasped the value of interacting with others while learning. As a highly independent person, certainly in my own learning, this is an important realization for me to come to. Until now, I have generally viewed

my learning as an individual activity; something I was responsible for and needed to accomplish on my own, based on my own capabilities. While the ultimate responsibility still lies with me, I have become open to the influence other can have on my learning. Recognizing the value of the relationships developed while in this program, and their impact on my learning and growth, I have a new found appreciation for the social dimension of learning. To help provide feedback and guidance along the way, a need exists to have trusted individuals in one's life. There is a need to open up to, and be vulnerable with others, allowing their feedback to have some influence over the directions I choose to take. Earlier in my life I would have been unable to understand the truth in the previous statements. Now, I cannot help but to appreciate learning through a social lens. Given that much of my work is rooted in the essence of community, I find it rather interesting that I had not explicitly come to this conclusion earlier.

Summary and Conclusion

As a student in this Master of Adult Education program I have experienced many opportunities to grow as a learner, educator, and community leader. When I look in the mirror today I see a different person than three years ago. My confidence has increased as I complete my daily work, and I have begun to better appreciate the value my contributions provide. My sense of self-worth has grown from when I began this program, as a result of the effort this program has required of me and what I have uncovered about my true self on a highly personal level. These areas of growth are directly related to my ability to clearly articulate thoughts and knowledge based upon the vocabulary I now have related to adult education and community development. Previously, it was challenging to convince others—and myself—about my capabilities and competencies as a practitioner. I now feel equipped with the language and skills to contribute more meaningfully as part of various communities as a direct result of what this

program required of me. Additionally, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses I have in the areas of research, education, leadership, and community development, has helped me to focus on learning opportunities that can strengthen areas where I may be deficient, while allowing me to leverage my existing strengths in supporting others. I am now in a better position to recognize where leadership exists, how different individuals learn best, and have come to appreciate how the notion of power shapes our experiences.

My interest in this program, and my research interests, developed out of highly personal experiences. Feeling that the learning I experience within certain environments often favours me more than others, I was curious to explore more about how my own learning transpires. Inquiring into my own experiences has helped me to appreciate how my practice can support other adult learners and where it fits within current societal context. Often times, individuals may not consider themselves leaders, having narrow and pre-conceived notions of what it means to lead. In believing that the definition of leadership is broad and offers an opportunity for any individual to lead, a central element of my practice is to support others in realizing that they too can be leaders. While not every individual may choose this path, existing leaders—myself included—have a responsibility to foster the qualities of leadership within others. Through learning activities in community, some which may not be that dissimilar to what Moses Coady was a vocal advocate for, my practice has the opportunity to engage, educate, and empower others in developing their potential so that they may generate the type of change they wish to see. The application of my knowledge need not be limited only to community settings. In appreciating that learning can be extracted from any experience, I can help individuals to unlock the learning embedded within their lives through acts of reflection, being receptive to feedback and open to new experiences. Within current roles I find myself having discussions regarding how place and environments can be designed to facilitate learning experiences for students. In understanding
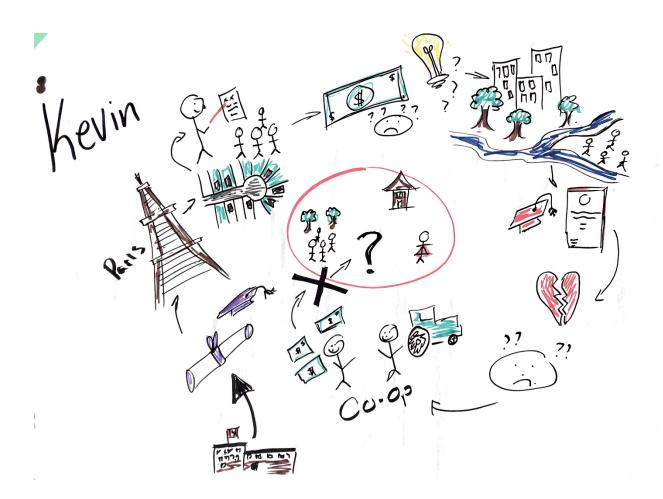
what may constitute place and how it can impact the learning embedded within given experiences, the value of my curiosity surrounding how place shapes learning, leadership and civic life is slowly becoming clearer.

      As a learner in this program, I have found value in sharing the process of learning with a cohort of classmates. I have come to recognize that self-directed learning is not a journey an individual takes on their own. As I move forward in my own practice, I plan on being intentional when integrating community elements into the learning which I structure for others and I would encourage other adult educators to do the same. If my experiences are at all representative of a larger group, there are many benefits to learning within group environments, especially as adults. Although the impact of learning within a community setting will likely be different for every individual, I now believe that there is immense value in not always learning alone.

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Appendix A – Bridging Visualisation

Appendix B – Home Office