

St. Francis Xavier University

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

By

Kevin Van Lierop
201703750

AE520
Research Project

Dr. Carole Roy
Advisor

London, Ontario
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Introduction

The purpose of this auto-ethnography is to investigate what role *place* has in shaping the learning experiences most influential for developing community *leadership* skills. When complete, this research project will contribute to filling one small gap within the existing literature regarding the relationship between place and learning, specifically the connecting of spatial elements to adult education for community-based action.

Context: Background to the 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 resonate more deeply with me than formal education. When considering such situated learning experiences, one aspect of particular interest is how feeling connected to specific places impacts 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 for 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 to what extent place impacts 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 research has neglected to connect spatial elements to adult education. This gap presents an opening for this research project to add additional value to the existing scholarly landscape.

Relevant Literature

What constitutes leadership can vary depending on how an individual situates themselves within a leader/follower relationship, and what they believe to be the central purpose of their role. Although consensus amongst scholars notes that leadership differs from management, a single, clearly defined understanding of the term may not exist (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Hanold, 2015; Schweigert, 2007). However, when leadership is considered within a community context, scholars appear to have a common appreciation of the term and its practical applications.

Coady (1939), Kretzman and McKnight (1993), Mathie and Cunningham (2008), Wheatley and Frieze (2006), and Schweigert (2007) all suggest focusing less on individual efforts and more on what contributes to the best interests of a collective when considering leadership. Further promoting the value in a collective approach, Brookfield and Preskill (2009) offer that leadership is a relational concept between individuals and groups. Schweigert adds to this thought that, “[i]n communities, the essential dynamics and characteristics of leadership appear more clearly in relational patterns of thinking, acting, and responding” (p. 326).

In considering what constitutes leadership within community, scholars have drawn attention to an essential component of successful community development work. Given that the efforts of leadership in community development can be under-appreciated, it is critical for

practitioners to know how to identify and foster effective leadership for citizen-led change. As community development and adult education share a common history (Coady, 1939; English & Mayo, 2012; Freire, 1970; Mathie & Cunningham, 2008; Shaw & Crowther, 2014), it is prudent to consider how adult education principles shape the development of community leaders.

To form an appreciation of how leadership skills are cultivated, educators should recognize the informal learning that is a central component of an individual's lived experience. Lindeman (1982) asserts that, "the resource of highest value in adult education is the *learner's experience*" (p. 121, emphasis in original). This claim is supported by the work of Delaney (2010) and Freire (1970) who understand that experiences can promote consciousness raising, and both individual and community empowerment. However, as deriving meaning from the informal learning which exists in experiences can be challenging, it may not always be possible in the absence of reflection (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014).

Consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which values reflection as an integral part of the learning process, and the work of both Schön (1983) and Bolton (2014), which insists on the importance of reflection amongst practitioners, Mündel and Schugurensky (2008) identify reflection as a tool for developing self-awareness. Given that leaning happens primarily through doing and then reflecting after the fact, developing a reflective praxis is essential for building upon an individual's experience, helping to explain both actions and beliefs (Freire, 1970; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014). For the purposes of informal learning, intentional reflection following an experience becomes increasingly important to assist individuals in recognizing their learning (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Peeters et al., 2014).

As informal learning cannot be planned, it is possible for any space or place to be transformed into a site of learning (McKee, 2014; Shor, 1992). However, as an area exhaustively reviewed on its own, place has not received the attention it deserves within adult education

research. Gruenewald (2003) identifies this gap in noting that, “the relationship between education and local space remains undertheorized and underdeveloped” (p. 642). Typically considered only as a container in which educational activities unfold, the value place offers, “as an enabler or producer of difference and power relations,” has yet to be a focus of regular study (Nesbit & Wilson, 2010, p. 395). Even for scholars like Plumb (2008), who touches on the connection between learning and an individual’s environment, little is often offered beyond abstract conceptualizations. Pieces of academic literature which build upon such theoretical understandings, to aid in understanding the pragmatic relationships between place and adult education, are few in numbers. Furthermore, for the significant role it plays in the development of community, research has neglected to connect spatial elements to adult education for community-based action (Foroughi & Durant, 2013). These gaps point to an opportunity for new research to consider the value of place for both education and community development purposes.

Theoretical Framework

To help understand and explain the findings of this research project I will refer to Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning as a primary means to situate my work amongst broader scholarly discourse. In recognizing the informal learning that happens as part of experiential learning, and the importance of reflection after the fact, I will draw from key adult education concepts including the work of Lindeman (1982), Bolton (2014) and Schön (1983) to codify the creation and analysis of research data. The central theories provided by these scholars are relevant as they directly align with the selected methodology of auto-ethnography.

Statement of Research Problem

The purpose of this research project is to investigate what role place plays in shaping the learning experiences most influential for developing community leadership. I will examine a series of critical incidents from select community leadership roles I have assumed between 2007 and 2017. Findings will be situated in the context of scholarly literature to build an appreciation of the learning experiences most influential in developing the skills essential to lead communities, and to what extent place has helped to foster such skills.

Research Questions

The primary research question that will guide this research project is:

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

I will also ask some related sub-questions:

- 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?

Definitions of Terms

To help focus research efforts, and clarify the meaning of complex terms, the following definitions will be referred to throughout this research project. Drawing upon the work from

Johnson (2012), when investigating the concept of **place** I will be referring to, “locations endowed with meaning” (p. 830). What constitutes meaning has yet to be defined or determined. Given that an individual’s perception of and connection to a given location is highly personal, what comprises meaning is likely to be subjective.

When considering **leadership**, this research project will look to the work from Margaret Wheatley. 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 closely aligns with my personal experience of what community leadership entails and allows for a selection of roles from my professional practice to be interpreted and analysed.

As this research project aims to investigate how place shapes community leadership, it is critical to define **community** itself. Bradshaw (2008) suggests defining community based on a common identity rather than place, because, “[p]laces are not necessarily communities” (p. 5). Defining community in such a way considers the changing habits and movements of members, while allowing individuals to gather around place if they recognize it as their collective element. Consistent with my experience that many communities do not centre on geographies, location, or place, selecting a definition of community which goes “beyond the confines of place” (Mathie & Cunningham, 2008, p. 7) is appropriate.

Methodology and Rationale

As a form of qualitative research that leverages a researcher’s awareness of self within cultural, social, and political contexts (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Bochner, & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Purcell, 2013), auto-ethnography has been selected as the methodology of choice for this research project. In addressing self, I can contribute to the development of a broader knowledge

base; making concepts understandable, relatable, and accessible to non-academic audience by sharing highly intimate experiences. Throughout the process, I will gain a number of personal insights. The biases I hold, and the limits of myself as an individual will be a focus of investigation. In situating myself among the contextual elements of: culture, time, place, society, and politics, it will become apparent how these elements shape my development as a researcher, practitioner, and leader (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017; Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008).

As a research methodology that uses personal experience to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices, auto-ethnography aims to show, “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 111). Situated as a leader within the communities I serve, it is highly appropriate to study my own experiences and learning as one way to build an appreciation of the conditions that foster community leadership skills. Also, given that the purpose of this research project blends together both academic research interests and personal intrigue regarding professional growth, selecting a methodology that combines these two curiosities seems fitting.

Auto-ethnography was deliberately selected over self-study as the methodology of choice for this research project. As I am not reflecting upon my practice to improve specific aspects of it, nor am I focusing on interactions as an educator with a specific interest group, self-study was deemed to be less appropriate as a methodology than auto-ethnography (Adult Education Department, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2008).

Research Methods

Building upon my positionality as a community leader, I will focus my auto-ethnographic research efforts on three distinct periods of my professional life between 2007 and 2017. These

periods were identified from reviewing the work I collected and synthesized for my professional portfolio (Van Lierop, 2017). The periods to be considered are as follows:

- **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

I will complete three reflections on critical incidents for each period. One reflection from each of the following categories: snapshots, artifacts, and metaphor (Muncey, 2005), will be included for each identified period, for a total of nine reflections. The details of each category are as follows:

- **Artifacts** – journal entries and other selected documents, collected over the past 10 years and amassed into a personal archive
- **Snapshots** – selected images from a personal collection of over a million images created, serving as a form of photo elicitation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 170)
- **Metaphor** – consider the phrase, “places called home” (Massey, 1994)–a term that I have returned to over the course of my career, in both writing and work formulation

While imposing structure onto the act of reflection can lead to shallow descriptions (Bolton, 2006) compared to the “thick descriptions” typical of an auto-ethnography (Geertz, 1973), I am cognizant of the need to deepen the description in each reflection. To uncover 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 will draw from Mitchell and Coltrinari's (2001) questions for reflective writing to make reflections more detailed and nuanced. Questions from Mitchell and Coltrinari will be selected based on their suitability for reflecting upon specific elements, and what they offer in terms of flexibility for interpretation and adaptation.

Data Analysis

Data will be coded, categorized, and grouped into concepts following Litchman's (2013) 6-step process (pp. 251–255). This process of coding and categorization will be completed manually. Information derived through data analysis will move from "organization to meaning" (Glesne, 2006, p. 164) using Wolcott's (1994) three means of data transformation: description—constructing the reflections; analysis—employing Litchman's process; and interpretation—situating findings within the context of culture and existing scholarly literature.

Data analysis will commence once all reflections have been created. While Glesne (2006), Litchman (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that the collection—or creation—and analysis of data should happen concurrently, I have chosen to separate these two parts of the process. Given the structure of my methods, I want to treat all data creation equally as to remove any avoidable bias that may develop from analyzing earlier data, before all data creation is complete. To isolate the processes of data creation and analysis I will not begin the coding, categorizing, or grouping until all reflections have been drafted.

Research Trustworthiness

As undertaking an auto-ethnography requires myself—as researcher *and* as subject—to be vulnerable, honest, and intense in self-reflective practice, it is essential that steps are taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. To help with reliability, generalizability, and validity

(Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011)—to ensure that my recollections are not out of touch with the social, political, and cultural contexts of the day—I plan to put to use the following strategies.

First, I will follow the framework for critical reflection previously outlined (see Research Methods) supported by the guiding questions from Mitchell and Coltrinari (2001). Second, I will engage an external reviewer who is aware of my professional practice, to examine my reflections to identify any misunderstandings, exclusions of essential elements—such as the social, political, or cultural contexts of the periods in question, and to highlight bias. Third, I will consult a critical friend, a current colleague and Master of Adult Education student, to provide direction in terms of writing critically and meeting the objectives of the academic program this research project is a component of. Lastly, to help distinguish between “my story” and an auto-ethnographic account, I will consult the relevant literature as "required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278).

Ethical Issues and Provisions

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), other individuals are always implicated in self-narrative accounts either as active participants or background characters (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011; Tullis, 2016). In considering the “relational ethics” (Ellis, 2007) found throughout auto-ethnography, I must be cognizant in my selection of critical incidents and the methods by which I choose to reflect upon them as to limit the exposure of individuals who influenced such experiences. Comments regarding any individual other than myself will be made in such ways to retain their anonymity. Mentions of any anonymous individual will be included only to provide

contextual information for the initial capture of critical incidents and not for any detailed reflection or analysis. The goal of this research project is to not implicate others but rather to focus on my own experiences as the primary source of data for further academic investigation.

In considering the ethics involved in completing an auto-ethnography I must not ignore my own positionality—the needs I have as a subject, and the responsibility I have as a researcher. Sharing such personal accounts, as part of a thesis or public presentation, has the potential to negatively impact my privacy, security, and wellbeing; once my thoughts and feelings are revealed through research they cannot be revised (Adams, 2008). In consultation with my academic advisors and critical friends, I am confident in my capabilities as a researcher and have the necessary supports available when ready to share the results of my work.

Significance: Contribution of Research

This research will build upon existing literature related to the importance of experience (Lindeman, 1982), space and learning (Gruenewald, 2003; McKee, 2014; Shor, 1992), and community leadership (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Schweigert, 2007; Wheatley, 2009). Noting a gap within the literature which connects spatial elements to adult education (Gruenewald, 2003; Nesbit & Wilson, 2010), specifically for community-based action (Foroughi & Durant, 2013), this research aims to add to the existing knowledge base while identifying opportunities for future research efforts. This research also has significance for both professional practice and personal growth. In understanding how the learning I experience while participating in community-based efforts shapes my evolution as a community leader, my aim is to develop as a more impactful leader while helping others to do the same. In appreciating how culture, context, time, and place have shaped my own experiences, the findings of this research project can be

used as a basis for a broader understanding of how community leadership skills are fostered, whereby my personal stories are representative of a larger group.

Dissemination Plan

When complete, I will present the research project to my academic advisor and other members of the St. Francis Xavier University Department of Adult Education, and it will form the basis for either the AE601 Synthesizing Exam or AE600 Thesis component of this Master of Adult Education program. To disseminate my research to the professional communities I serve, I may: draft a blog post to share via the social media platform, LinkedIn, or; design a graphic-based executive summary of my findings to distribute through the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, or the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. To further my academic curiosity, this research may provide a foundation for future academic research efforts, or community-based professional practice endeavours. I may also present my findings at conferences or possibly in publications.

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