The Power of Place in Leadership Development: Learning, Location, and Leadership Development

We speak idiomatically of “knowing one’s place”, or “feeling out of place”, or we may be “going places”. But, what is the role of place in learning – especially in leadership learning? I’ve been blessed with the good fortune of living, working, traveling, learning and teaching in some of the most awe-inspiring natural (and built) environments in the world. Intuitively, I sense that place has profoundly shaped my life experiences. I believe that there’s a power of place that colors and enlivens our experiences as human beings. Consider for example – where we choose to vacation, to live, and where we seek out inspiration. Countless magazines annually report “the top 10 best places to …” And, Richard Florida has captured the world’s attention, by linking success in the creative economy to specific geographies, reminding us that place does matter.

We can’t always verbalize it, but we find place to be a tremendously powerful force in our life experiences. More specifically, I sense this is also true of our experiences with leadership development. Of course there’s a link between learning and location – it’s why we travel great distances and pay a premium to conduct our executive development programs ocean-side or in a mountain retreat setting; versus in yet, another non-descript chain hotel conference room in a windowless basement in Anywhere-ville. In fact, cultural geographers have a word, topophilia, to describe the attachment we often feel to particular places; or more precisely, the affective bond between people and place or environmental setting (Tuan, 1999). And, environmental psychology (e.g., Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) is a field that has done much to increase our understanding of how the natural setting shapes our learning experience. Many disciplines have emerged to focus on this question of the power of place, approaching it through different conceptual lenses: cultural geography, environmental psychology, psychogeography and spiritual geography, to name a few.

Despite the importance that other disciplines assign to place, the practice of leadership development has not formally or systematically approached the natural setting with a curiosity about its relation to leadership learning. I am curious about my personal experiences. Why do I have such fond memories of some places where I’ve engaged in leadership learning: a team building retreat at Osprey Point along the wetland shores of the Chesapeake Bay; a lecture on leadership in the hallowed halls of the University of Oxford; and a workshop on creativity and change in the vibrant Latin Quarter of Aarhus, Denmark? While other places do not evoke such a strong (and, positive) response. This article is an invitation to leadership development practitioners and leaders – to begin a formal, deeper exploration of the power of place in leadership development. My assumption is: that place matters.

My curiosity has deepened since I arrived in Banff, Canada, four years ago, to serve as Executive Director of Leadership Development at The Banff Centre – one of the world’s premier centres for creativity and leadership development. The Banff Centre is located in Banff National Park, Canada’s first National Park, which is also recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Banff is globally recognized as a place of breathtaking
beauty, situated in the heart of the majestic Canadian Rocky Mountains. It’s a place where the physical grandeur of the mountain scape lifts the human spirit and the creative magnificence of the mountainous geology inspires human creativity. The Banff Centre – the place, its programs, and the people are intimately interwoven with this fortuitous psychogeography. When I reflect upon my decision to come to Banff, it’s deeply tied to the calling of the place. I am curious – why are we drawn so powerfully to some places? More specifically, I am curious, how can the power of place enhance a leadership development experience?

I approach such questions from a practical perspective. Today, my work as a leadership development practitioner is conducted in a place that is situated on the side of Sleeping Buffalo Mountain and in the shadow of Mount Rundle, in the awe-inspiring Canadian Rocky Mountains. At The Banff Centre we’re keenly aware of the power of place. However, we didn’t discover the power of place, as if it were a New Age phenomenon waiting to be found. In fact, for 13,000 years the Aboriginal people have found medicine in the Bow Valley, where The Banff Centre is located. And, today, we hear from the leaders from around the globe who come to Leadership Development at The Banff Centre, that they similarly find the transformative and healing powers of this place.

Our experience at The Banff Centre and the power of place found on the side of Sleeping Buffalo Mountain is congruent with what Aboriginal people have recognized for a long time: that sacred places exist – where people have gone for healing, counseling, and learning from elders. For Aboriginal people, place is an integral part of how people know who they are, and a repository of knowledge in and of itself. For example, the La’uwelnew, First Nations people of the Saanich Inlet on the West Coast of Canada have a word – “chelengan” – which translates as “teachings of the places where you come from”. Might the Aboriginal world view and ways of knowing be helpful for us, as we seek to better understand the teachings of the places where we come from?

Again, here I want to try to make sense of this phenomenon – the power of place, specifically within the practice of leadership development. In the k-12 and college learning environments we hear terms like: place-based education, expeditionary learning, adventure education, etc. – that speak to the centrality of place in the learning process. However, while there are emerging examples of the centrality of place in leadership development, little has been written about it – especially, a coherent view of the phenomenon.

Learning About a Place

What I am referring to here is not simply about learning about a place – like expeditionary learning. Expeditionary learning typically transports learners to a place, where learning is focused on learning about the place or the cultures of that place. For example, consider Expedition Inside Culture. Since 2001, classroom and pre-service teachers have participated in an international workshop that focuses on preparing students and teachers for life in an interconnected world. These intercultural exchange projects are facilitated by an organization that originated in Poland, called Expedition Inside Culture,
which focuses on immersion of students in a specific local region/culture. Programs such as this one allow students to gain valuable learning about a place.

Learning In a Place

However, consider the example of Cape Farewell, created by artist David Buckland in 2001, to instigate a cultural response to climate change. In this instance, learners are similarly transported to a place; in this case, the High Arctic, to engage in a sort of expeditionary learning – an ambitious programme of activity with climate science at its core. Cape Farewell has brought together leading artists, writers, scientists, educators and media for a series of expeditions into the wild and challenging High Arctic. Together they have mapped, measured and been inspired by this awesome environment, and have endeavoured to bring home stories and artworks that tell how a warming planet is impacting on this wilderness. In this case, learning about the High Arctic isn’t the focus. Rather, the participants are engaging in learning about climate change, using the place of the High Arctic as a sort of vessel for their learning. In this example, the focus is more on learning in a place versus learning about a place.

Learning From a Place

What I am seeking to uncover is this. All of us have had powerful experiences of place, whether in a remote and isolated spot of natural beauty or in the midst of a crowded and busy built environment – places where we have come to discover a reality greater than ourselves. These places have taken on an important role in our lives, and we may find ourselves drawn back to these places, returning again and again, seeking to recapture the vitality of the original encounter. In these places we might have had a significant conversation, or discovered an insight about ourselves, or perhaps we may have made a decision that gave shape to our future. Such places are significant because they provide a context for powerful experiences – the learning/experience, which we deemed meaningful, occurred in a place, not just about the place; but the learning arose from the place.

While there is no ready-made list of such places, today a readily recognized list of such places exists in the minds of leadership development practitioners. For example: The Banff Centre, Findhorn, Hollyhock, Melk Abbey, Mohonk Mountain House, and the Whidbey Institute – just to name a few. In simple terms, these are institutions that capitalize on bringing learning and location together. I should more accurately suggest, that such places do not have to be privately held institutions and the land which they’re located on, but such places may be found on public lands, as well. For example, a recently advertised “Entrepreneurs Walkabout” was described as providing:

… leaders an opportunity to directly experience the Powers of Place in Northern New Mexico. It combines an adaptation of time-honored aborigine tradition of "going walkabout" with modern frameworks for strategic thinking, reflection, business planning practices, and peer dialogues.
Most people would agree, that a beautiful natural setting, such as those noted above, could be a great selling point for any educational organization that offers residential learning experiences (e.g., conferences, retreats, workshops). However, Grill (2003) notes:

... if educators and administrators understand the benefits of certain natural settings, they could use them to enhance the appeal and overall effectiveness of educational programs. Unfortunately, the role of the natural setting is not explored in depth in the literature on adult learning environments.

However, the benefits of natural settings are described by environmental psychologists. And, they may shed some light on the power of place for us, leadership development practitioners. Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) describe restorative natural environments. And, Hartig & Staats (2003) specifically define “restorative environments”, as specific geographical contexts that renew diminished functional capabilities. Today, many of us feel overwhelmed in our daily routines and directly experience diminished functional capabilities, simply because we’re out of balance. We often seek out retreats from our routines because they afford us a restorative environment – we literally go on a retreat. We’ll often refer to the “different rhythm” we experience in such places – a slower rhythm that allows us to be present. To go on a retreat and finding healing in the restorative power of place is similar to our “being away” on vacation. A residential learning environment seems to offer a like-experience to leadership learners. Being away affords us time away from our everyday experience, an opportunity to immerse ourselves in a world away from our daily routine. Other environmental psychologists (e.g., Herzog, Black, Fountaine, and Knotts, 1997) have identified how natural settings can provide attentional recovery and reflection space. Attentional recovery allows us to clear our minds and replenish our energy, and reflection assists us in dealing with unresolved personal issues as well as larger questions. These are real benefits afforded by natural settings. How can we more consciously design leadership learning experiences to link learning and location; to allow learners to experience the restorative nature of natural settings and the attentional recovery and reflection spaces that they afford?

As we consider the relationship between natural settings and learning we need to expand our understanding of what role the power of place plays in leadership learning. This is an invitation, to join in the discovery as we seek to understand the power of place in leadership learning.

References


**Other Suggested Reading**


**About the Author**

Nick Nissley, Ed.D. serves as Executive Director of Leadership Development at The Banff Centre, in the beautiful Canadian Rocky Mountains. He earned his Ed.D. from George Washington University’s Graduate School of Education and Human Development, in Washington, DC, USA. Nick proudly states that while he and his family could live anywhere, they *choose* to live in Banff, because they don’t just want to live – they want to *thrive*. 