**Walking the Liminal in Leadership Learning: Uncovering Being, Belonging and Embodiment**

**Abstract**

This paper has been born from years of working at the interface between outdoor and indoor learning. We have drawn on philosophical work undertaken on liminality, being, belonging and embodiment and have been able to link these observations and theories to practical sessions with emerging leaders through working with middle management groups from a wide range of industries. Previous work and observations of groups and individuals has been in various rural, wild and urban settings in England and Wales/Cymru. This paper focuses on the data collected from 2 cohorts following the same programme of personal development in a large public service organisation based near the centre of Cardiff over the winter, spring and autumn of 2017.

**Introduction**

Our starting point was to explore the impact on learning of ideas such as being-in-the-world (Zundel, 2013), belonging (Edwards, 2015) and embodiment (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Ropo, Sauer and Salovaara, 2013) from a leadership learning experience of middle level managers. In addition we are interested in the liminal space (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015) created by reflective walks as a method of learning (Zundel, 2013). Our own paper builds on these interests and experiences and is taken from two different aspects of the same topic, one from the practical elements of walking itself; the reality of working with groups through walking and the other from an academic theoretical viewpoint and the ways in which these two foci intertwine and interlink.

To further explore issues of liminality, being, belonging and embodiment we gained access to a management development programme based in Cardiff where the purpose of the programme was to motivate staff and to render the delegates more focussed and more productive. The company description maintains that delegates:

*‘will be able to positively respond to circumstances rather than react to them. People who have taken the course are more able to cope with stressful situations, are more focused and better able to work as a team’.*

In the context of our study the ‘indoors’ is the workplace of managers involved in the programme and the outdoors is the place to which they visit as part of the programme, for example, a cemetery, a park and residential and commercial localities, among other places.

A delegate reflection on this was captured by the researcher:

*‘Leaving the building, a delegate commented on what a relief she felt as soon as she went through the door to the outside. A discussion started around the lack of air inside, and the tension this creates in us. Another comment was "I really needed this’.*

These places walked to were very close to their workplace. Yet, for many, the places walked seemed mysterious and remote. Many delegates reported being unaware of the local environment and the surroundings outside their company buildings.

The researcher talked about how the delegates had:

*‘…stopped inside the park, under a small group of trees. The mood was extremely cheerful, with people commenting that they never knew how close their offices were to such a peaceful, huge space.’*

The 12-week programmes we have followed here (Cohort one and two, January and September, 2017) seem to have strong links with the Feldenkrais Methods of embodiment (Melina, Burgess, Lid-Falkman and Marturano, 2013) with an emphasis on moving into a place where noticing difference, being awake to what is happening, using the body as a source of learning and paying attention to what interests you, is in direct contrast to what lies ‘behind’ the participants, namely their workplace. Being outside amongst ‘nature’ makes people feel more alive (Ryan et al., 2010). Here there are elements of ‘soft fascination’, effortlessness and cognitive quiet (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) seem to suggest the efficacy of learning and working outside.

Here we also contribute to the recognition of creative and alternative approaches to leadership and management learning (Edwards et al, 2013) but providing a deeper appreciation of transitory occurrences in indoor and outdoor learning. We do this by pulling together literature on walking, (for example space, pace and place) (Heneberry and Turner, 2016) in connection to leadership and management learning.

***Walking***

In recent years the role of walking as an aid for learning and interaction for leadership development has grown and interest has been arising in a number of leadership areas and sub-topics such as coaching (Reading, 2016, Turner, 2017), philosophy and management (Zundel, 2013), use of space (Seanor, 2014, Richardson, 2015), positivity (O’Donovan, 2015), creative interventions (Kahneman, 2011), gender studies (Keinänen & Beck, 2017) and leadership development (Bass, 1990).

**Reflective Practice**

Further curiosity about the impact of learning and walking was stimulated by the re-thinking of reflective practice (Zundel, 2013). Both Descartes and Heidegger use concepts of space and time and Zundel’s application of this in terms of management development and walking suggests current practice is dangerously *‘static and lifeless’* and that walking that helps to radically shift delegate learning, health and behaviour (Wilmot et al, 2012). Hays (2013) suggests that, under the right conditions, produces:

*‘…a fundamental shift in the learner’s view of self or the world allows him or her to operate differently and more efficaciously.’* (Hays in Kuppers and Pauleen, 2013 p. 141)

**Liminality**

We also draw on the notion of liminal Spaces as described by Turner (1975). Here he suggests a liminal space is the creation of a pre-state of preparation leads to a passage through an element of transition. As a part of this there are three stages: preliminal rites (or rites of separation), which can be characterised by breaking with previous practices and routines liminal rites (or transition rites): that allows for a feeling of starting again in preparation for a new future state. This middle transitional phase implies a passage through something recognisably different – a liminality. Finally a post-liminal rites (or rites of incorporation): during this stage, the person is re-introduced to, in this case society, with a new improved identity and way of behaving. Hawkins and Edwards (2014), develops this theme further and discusses the importance of wrestling with aspects of liminality and doubt in the leadership learning process. The use of walking as a liminal space is explored explicitly within our research development.

**Methodology**

Our approach to this research was to take an ethnographic and reflexive approach. We have concentrated on a bounded programme experience revealing an ordered nature to the data we use, we firstly look at the diaries completed by participants and then work outwards from these experiences to look at the experiences of the facilitators and the more general reflections of the researchers. In addition, we have started to look at the other artefacts produced from the programmes such as pictures and videos by using Short’s techniques (Short, 2017)

One author has been accumulating a large amount of data and recorded material and this has been collected in various formats including reflective diaries, video and audio recordings as well as written-up interventions related to the walking sessions. An informal group of academic thinkers have met during this time and compiled reflective articles and have adopted a reflective ‘supervisory’ type of relationship with each other, focussing thinking about walking and its place in adult learning. Such activities, which have included the development of some (currently) unpublished papers and a joint presentation at Leadership Development conference workshops (Leadership Development Conference at Henley College, The University of Reading, July 2015) have allowed this informal group to focus, in more detail, on the constituent elements of walking in this wider field of personal development leading to this current collection of data from a more organised and focused and commercial set of interactions. The two authors, another researcher and the group content facilitator have been working with a specific group of workers from a large public body in the South-East of Wales/Cymru.

Once a week for twelve weeks the group of twelve staff members were led in a walk lasting about one and a quarter hours around various open parts of a major Welsh City which included public places, parks, cemeteries and public thoroughfares and paths. The researcher was imbedded in the group as a participant and she recorded her own reflective thoughts about the challenges posed to the group by the facilitator. In addition, recordings of the walks were taken through audio and video capture using a small video recorder.

The completed diaries were collected in at the end of the 12-week programme and although just under half of the delegates completed and forwarded their diaries there are 36 distinct entries in the diaries covering the 3 months of walking out from the workplace as a discreet programme of self-development and leadership of self.

During the programme, which lasted between January and April of 2017, on-going discussions and updating meetings were held with the embedded researcher about the walks and this narrative has helped to contextualise the programme. Her recall and narrative helped to shape our concepts and were a useful part in designing the data anaylsis.

Our initial work led us to four distinct areas of theory which included the work about ‘belonging’ (Edward, 2015, MacFarlene, 2012), further philosophical standpoints (Cunliffe, 2009) related to Hiedigger’s work and research methodology under the scope of ‘Being-in-the-World’ (Salovaara, 2011 and Zundel, 2013); the ideas about embodiment (Merlou-Ponty, 1962) and the role of walking in explaining liminality (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015 and Turner, 1975).

The two authors used this disciplined view of the data in order find a form of analysis and data collection so that the anonymous data could be analysed through a close reading of the reflective diary and the photo and video data from the walks themselves.

**Initial Findings**

Our initial findings are currently being developed in light of further analysis of the raw data. Overall our findings are centred around the experience of the delegates and how they have responded to the layered development of the researched programmes.

Here is an example of the researcher’s notes as she experienced being with the delegates as they initially experienced the first walk:

*‘Sight first, people were talking a lot about what they were seeing as opposed to previous ‘getting to know each other’ type discussions.*

*Noted objects were the inscriptions on gravestones, the size of the trees, the rain, the type of terrain. People seemed to find it easy to stay present, due to the variety of external stimulus.*

*Sound – Rain was notable, clothes noises, sounds of feet on various surfaces, dripping water onto and off umbrellas, ambulance sirens, road noise. (see recording ‘hearing copy 2)*

*Feel – the facilitator suggested concentrating on feet, allowing them to create a grounding effect, gathering scattered thoughts. People seemed to find this more difficult, but comments were made after the exercise about being able to feel cold air going into nostrils, deliberately walking on different surfaces to see if they could be felt through shoes.*

*Brisk walking exercise – to warm people up and to enliven them before the relaxation / body scan exercise, working on letting go of tension in various body parts. This drew attention to the environment, using it to create movement for warmth, to sit on logs for the exercise, to focus on the freshness of the air to breath relaxation through the body.*

*Additional notes – people seemed to move very naturally into different groups and pairs, with a notable lack of awkward silence. Umbrellas seemed to occasionally block some conversation, ‘walling in’ small groups of people. Pace of walking seemed to suit most people.’*

We are still working on the interpretation of the video footage and photographs and we continue to use walking in official university programmes to test out the role of walking, learning and being outside.

**References**

Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational dynamics*, *18*(3), 19-31.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2009). The philosopher leader: On relationalism, ethics and reflexivity—A critical perspective to teaching leadership. *Management Learning*, *40*(1), 87-101.

Edwards, G., Elliott, C., Iszatt-White, M., & Schedlitzki, D. (2013). Critical and alternative approaches to leadership learning and development. *Management Learning*, *44*(1), 3-10.

Edwards, G. (2015). *Community as leadership*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Edwards, G., Elliott, C., Iszatt-White, M., & Schedlitzki, D. (2013). Critical and alternative approaches to leadership learning and development. *Management Learning*, *44*(1), 3-10.

Hawkins, B., & Edwards, G. (2014). Liminality and threshold concepts and leadership learning: An initial exploration. *Management Learning*.

### Hays J. 2013, in ‘A Handbook of Practical Wisdom edited by Kupers W. and Pauleen D.J (2013) Chapter 7 Transformation and Transcendence for Wisdom Gower Publishing Limited page 142

### Heneberry, P. & Turner A. F. (2016)  [Critical action learning–rituals and reflective spaces](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14767333.2015.1130349) Action Learning: Research and Practice

### Ladkin, D. & Taylor, S.S. (2010) Enacting the ‘true self’: towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership. Leadership Quarterly 21: 64–74

Macfarlane, R. (2012). *The old ways: A journey on foot*. Penguin.

Mannion, G., Fenwick A., & Lynch, J. (2012): Place- responsive
pedagogy: learning from teachers’ experiences of excursions in nature, ***Environmental Education Research***

Melina, L. R., Burgess, G. J., Lid-Falkman, L., & Marturano, A. (Eds.). (2013). *The Embodiment of Leadership: A Volume in the International Leadership Series, Building Leadership Bridges*. John Wiley & Sons.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). Phenomenology of perception, trans. Colin Smith.

Nelson, J., Zaccaro, S.J., & Herman, J.L. (2010). Strategic information provision and experiential variety as tools for developing adaptive leadership skills. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 62(2): 131-142.

Keinänen, M., & Beck, E. E. (2017). Wandering intellectuals: establishing a research agenda on gender, walking, and thinking. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *24*(4), 515-533.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan.

Kaplan, S. & Kaplan, R. (1989) The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective. Cambridge University Press, New York.

O'Donovan, H. (2015). *Mindful Walking: Walk Your Way to Mental and Physical Well-Being*. Hachette Ireland.

Reading, S. (2016) Coaching Psychology International. An exploration of the ‘walk and talk’ coaching session format Volume 9, Issue 1. Pages 17 - 23

Ropo, A., Sauer, E. & Salovaara P. (2013) Embodiment of leadership through material place Leadership Volume: 9 issue: 3, page(s): 378-395

Richardson, T. (2015). Walking inside out: Contemporary British psychogeography.

Ryan, R. M., Weinstein, N., Bernstein, J., Brown, K. W., Mistretta, L., & Gagne, M. (2010). Vitalizing effects of being outdoors and in nature. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *30*(2), 159-168.

Salovaara, P. (2011). *From leader-centricity toward leadership: a hermeneutic narrative approach*. University of Tampere.

Seanor, P. (2014) Thinking space: Space as a provocation with a
pragmatic, yet playful, approach with two feet on the ground. In: 6th
International Social Innovation Research Conference, University of Northampton, 1-3 September 2014

Short H.L. & Warren S.K. (2017) Grounded Visual Pattern Analysis: Photographs in Organizational Field Studies. Organizational Research Methods 1-25.

Turner A.F. (2017) Coaching through walking. The Coaching Psychologist. Vol 13. No. 2 December 2017

.

Turner, V. W. (1975). *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Cornell University Press.

Wilmot, E. G., Edwardson, C. L., Achana, F. A., Davies, M. J., Gorely, T., Gray, L. J., & Biddle, S. J. (2012). Sedentary time in adults and the association with diabetes, cardiovascular disease and death: systematic review and meta-analysis.

Zundel, M. (2013). Walking to learn: Rethinking reflection for management learning. *Management Learning*, *44*(2), 109-126.