

Margaret Mitchell

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Reflective Leadership Essay

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### **A Reflection on Two Summers as a Laidlaw Scholar**

At the time of my application to the Laidlaw Programme, I was at a critical juncture in my life. Though I was active in leadership positions in high school, nearly a year and a half had gone by since I last exercised the skills they demanded. I was at a point where I could either continue to let those strengths atrophy, along with my confidence and perception of myself as a leader, or do something true to my talents and interests. My apathy in pursuing leadership opportunities during my first year of university came from being burned out by countless projects in the preceding years. Previously I was drawn to leadership roles for the sake of directing my energy where I knew it would be useful, both to others and for my own development, but my heart was not invested in most of these projects. I often felt deeply unfulfilled, making me seriously doubt that I was actually deserving of the positions I held or the tasks I was assigned. The opportunity to conduct my own Laidlaw research project suited my needs at that time perfectly, and made me realize that leadership can be directed inward – in fact, any outward-facing leadership must, to be successful, have the foundation of self-leadership.

My first summer of research developed this skill of self-leadership, which is the habit of reflecting upon one's abilities, preferences, and position in society, and setting out concrete goals related to these things. My initial proposal drew me towards women's autobiographical literature, and I was interested in exploring the language women have used to write about themselves, and how these writers formulate the idea of the self. The final project became less rigid in terms of linguistic analysis, and more engaged with social structures which the books themselves were engaged with. I went in with expectations of grasping semiotics and psychoanalytical theory, doing feminist and Marxist readings of these texts, or immediately understanding what anyone meant by a 'text' rather than a book, but realized that speaking about the self, or about gender, class, race, culture, or nation is a messy process.

I found myself overwhelmed with conflicting critical approaches to the works I was reading. I expected myself to be an expert on something which was completely new to me. At the end of those five weeks, I did find my research somewhat unfulfilling, perhaps due to the inexhaustible nature of some of my project's questions: What is the self? How do we articulate it? Does it change

when we articulate it? My conclusion was ultimately an in-conclusion, because the point of all of these articulations of self are precisely to escape conclusion, to challenge the dominant structures of language and the narratives which establish the self as coherent, consistent, and completely knowable.

These things are difficult for me to articulate still, and I felt especially embarrassed during the research poster presentation event, when I had to explain my findings to other scholars and faculty. Someone asked me why study women's autobiography, if I was proposing that women are biologically geared towards using different language than or thinking differently from men, and I had to explain the social circumstances that uniquely shape women's experiences. This conversation did make me question the foundations of my project and made me very unsure of what I was doing, because each woman's life experience is so individual that it hardly makes sense to use such a broad, vague category to group people, especially when one's 'society' is local, not universal. However, I see that this kind of assertion was what I was trying to correct by using the category of 'woman' – being a woman undeniably shapes our experiences and has shaped them for centuries, even if not in a perfectly consistent or dependable way across space or time. This is evidenced by the texts I studied, which are all so different that it is hard to justify why they rest in the same category other than for the fact that their authors identify as women and represent the ways in which structures of power repeatedly restrict female agency.

Over the course of the academic year between my two Laidlaw projects, I found myself more deeply engaged with my coursework and research. I suddenly felt so much more capable when it came to pursuing topics I was interested in, and felt more confident developing my own essay questions that were creative and experimental. My Laidlaw research showed me that scholarship does not have to be totally divorced from other aspects of my life, and in fact benefits from being intertwined with my personal concerns. I write and learn best when I am attached to the work I am doing. I might have previously found this naïve for a researcher, because it implies a lack of critical distance from my topic, but I had to realize that my personal goal as a scholar is not so much to be a critic or apply the rational rules of thinking and analyzing that I believed to be more highly valued, but to dig more deeply into the mess of life and human experience, things which cannot be easily defined. In some ways I found a marriage between my talent for scholarship and my poetic or creative interests.

Although by my fifth week of research I finally felt that I understood what a self-directed project entailed, my second summer in the Laidlaw Programme was equally frustrating as the first,

though in different ways. I saw many of my previous insecurities as a researcher repeated, and the fact that I was no longer able to claim complete inexperience made me feel even more lost, unproductive, and undeserving of my scholarship. As a Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights intern for Women's Rights Initiative (WORI) Uganda, I entered into a field that was intertwined with my research into women's life writing, yet much more concrete than the theory I had previously studied. I felt most comfortable doing research into the state of women's health and education in Uganda, and reading about other educational schemes to teach young women about menstrual health and the reproductive cycle. However, when it came to actually doing something with this information, I was hesitant to propose ideas of my own. I felt like an outsider to the realities that my supervisors faced, and was unsure what about my privileged life experiences made me qualified for this role. My work often felt redundant, as though I were simply re-iterating past contributions of scholars and social workers more experienced than myself.

I was concerned that I did not have any practical skills that I could provide which would make me an asset to the team. At a loss for ideas and exhausted from too much research bleeding into my non-working hours, I sketched a few storyboard slides and wrote a short script for a video that could be shared with young girls on social media or in schools. I looked into how much it might cost to hire an animator to create content of this kind, but my supervisors appreciated my work and trusted my qualifications enough to ask that I make it myself. My research had put me ahead of schedule, so I had extra time to color the slides using Photoshop. It had been years since I had done any illustration of this kind, and I had to break out some outdated computer gadgets to do so, but I was reminded that I still do have valuable creative skills, even if they are not my primary pursuits.

As an undergraduate student, I cannot yet escape the feeling of being an amateur at most things, though being surrounded by highly intelligent and talented peers can put pressure on me to be extraordinary. I do, in fact, desire to be more than ordinary. I have learned that this is reflective of my potential, rather than what I have actually done. I am on a different trajectory from each of my peers in terms of learning and growing, but my project and passions are very different from many of theirs. This scholarship forced me to grapple with comparison and recognize that it is a serious inhibitor to my personal growth. During the first leadership weekend, I was envious of other scholars' agility as leaders and creative thinkers. They were quite outspoken and seemed so confident in their opinions, or offered sharp but perceptive criticism in group discussions. I seemed to weigh everything equally, considering many different courses of action or ways of thinking, but I felt ashamed for lacking a critical eye or individual stance of my own. However, I see that, while I am

not so vocally opinionated, I do have a good eye for reconciling conflict and guiding a group towards a cohesive vision which can accommodate the best and most compatible of everyone's interests.

While my work has largely been independent, I have needed to rely on this skill in my ghostwriting work outside of university. I am often tasked with taking someone's rough outline of notes and general ideas and putting it into words, or re-purposing an article draft to make it clearer and more concise. Amplifying my voice is not the priority, but I know that I am given these jobs because I can give valuable insight. This job was initially daunting, as I lacked the confidence in my writing abilities to see myself as capable of guiding the flow of an experienced adult's argument, but I now recognize my value to a team in these situations. I was once reluctant to alter anything, but now I have seen that my gift is being able to help others improve their articulation so that their work and their ideas can be more effective.

My two summers as a Laidlaw scholar have been full of self-reflection. I feel much more confident in my abilities to adapt to unexpected circumstances and to learn about new fields of research or work at short notice. I used to think that so many job prospects would be closed off to me because I studied English, but I now see so much more value in my education and in my personal interests, which I cannot change, nor would I want to. Now familiar with the experience of creating my own guidelines for a project, or at least having the creative license to interpret guidelines as I see myself being able to best apply my skills, I have become comfortable with discomfort. It has been difficult, though liberating, for me to recognize that most of my future projects and jobs will require me to create my own vision, as there is rarely a 'correct' way of doing things.

I have already seen an incredible improvement on my self-leadership abilities. I used to believe that I lacked the ability to discipline myself, but really I needed a way to integrate my passions with work. Before our final leadership weekend, we were asked to create goals for ourselves that could be achievable in the coming months. I have trouble visualizing my future, but instead of setting goals of what I believed I *should* be doing, in terms of determining a job and constricting my vision of the future, I decided to focus on things that were important to me and that could be worked into my routine manageably. I realized that what I really wanted to do was enter into a creative industry, and have since been able to apply myself to these goals of regular writing, submissions, and outreach. I am more focused on my writing, and have begun working at an art gallery and on a fashion team for a charity fashion show. I have gladly allowed these things to take priority in my life, and feel liberated by the joy of loving the work that I do, and doing it for myself.

This ability to discern my passions and talents is the first step to fruitful self-leadership, as well as team-leadership. I now see how, all along, my interest in English literature has corresponded to my desire to write. I want to use language to express my and other people's ideas, to inspire others with curiosity, and to clarify and reconcile language's own miscommunications. Language often works against itself, but this is also evidence of its power and multivalence, its potential to have significant change in the world. I owe this revelation to the Laidlaw Foundation, for their generosity in fueling my exploration of literature, and to my fellow Laidlaw cohort. I deeply admire their passion for their chosen academic fields. They are constantly pursuing answers, and inspiring me to do so in my own way. The lesson which I have internalized the most from my Laidlaw scholarship – that there are many valuable types of leadership – came through my friendships with them. Being chosen for this scholarship has affirmed what I have known about myself but found hard to believe: that I have the gift of being a leader, and have a responsibility to nurture and exercise this gift.