

Laidlaw Research and Leadership Program – Summer 1 Report

Gabrielle Fullam

1551 words

Introduction

The following is a report of my experience of summer one of the Laidlaw Program. It details my own personal challenges and key take-aways from my experience undertaking my research project and personal leadership development. It focuses primarily on my individual experience and journey, however further details on my specific ongoing project *“Ticking the Other Category”* can be found in my Literature Review and my Laidlaw Project Poster.

Part One: Research Project Experience

I drew heavily from my own experience when selecting and designing my own research project. As a mixed-race woman, I felt as though my own experience navigating the boundaries of race and ethnicity was overlooked. I felt unseen by wider social institutions and misunderstood by my peers and superiors alike. My Laidlaw Project was an opportunity for me to meet with experts, research racial classification systems and try to understand the mixed-race experience at a macro-social level. Initially, I had planned to conduct a cross-national analysis of racial classification mechanisms. I then planned to conduct interviews with mixed-race people on their experience of discrimination, hostility, and compare the accuracy with which social institutions can reflect this.

The cultural context surrounding my project changed dramatically at the beginning of summer. Following the death of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests triggered one of the largest calls for racial equality and justice. Public attitudes and discourses about race dominated the public sphere.

Trinity itself was responding to calls for generating a Black Studies Module. In light of this, I was inspired to take time to re-evaluate to core questions of my project. This summer, I generated a 6,000-word Literature Review, which evaluates and synthesises the major core works and methodological problems of evaluating mixed-race research. Working slowly and efficiently with my supervisor resulted in a body of work which I am genuinely happy about and feel is accessible as well as informative. Due to COVID-19, I spent much longer than 6 weeks on the project itself, which feels like a unique opportunity. I have used this literature review to identify key areas to explore in the emerging field of mixed-race research, and thus design a research instrument (interviews and questionnaires) which will allow me to pinpoint and target these issues effectively. I continuously showed my literature review to Dr Moriarty, as well as showing it to undergraduate peers to see how they processed and understood the language. I felt as though this was particularly important, as the accessibility of racial research is pivotal to the destruction of racist attitudes within society, as highlighted by the changing social and cultural context in which I was working in.

Next summer, I plan on conducting these interviews and writing an academic paper with these results, which I hope to submit to a number of relevant peer-reviewed journals. However, I have also realised the importance and relevance of my project, and myself and my supervisor have noted the emerging trend of visual sociological studies being effective at communicating racial issues.

Therefore, I also hope to produce a documentary, which will use footage of the interviews, as well as

document the methodological process and personal development involved in the creation of my Laidlaw project. The documentary and the academic paper that I hope to output will hopefully showcase all the work I have done along with the urgency and importance of the issue. This approach to the project resolved the academic complexity with the importance of being able to communicate this information to the communities who need it. Researching and reading about mixed-race people's experiences validated many of my own experiences of oppression. By making my complex academic research accessible, it gains the capacity to help the communities of which it speaks of. Developing a research paper that both tackled the nuance of ethnic boundaries while also producing something tangible and accessible was one of the biggest challenges to structuring my research. Reflective thinking, wide-reading and constant dialogue was useful in addressing this.

The most difficult aspect of my project was the sheer enormity of the issue, as well as how personal and emotive many of the sociological studies were. Re-designing and targeting my research on particular themes became difficult. However, I was able to overcome these challenges using skills and resources provided to me by the Laidlaw Program. Organisational tools and skills learned from our Leadership Development seminars were incredibly useful. However, what was pivotal to the completion of this project was my regular meetings with my supervisor, Dr Elaine Moriarty. These frequent meetings were invaluable to my progress over the summer. Dr Moriarty met with me regularly, and continuously critiqued edited versions of my literature review. Dr Moriarty was able to point out problems and issues with my research and suggested related areas and new strands of analysis. This allowed me to strengthen my literature review and resulted in a final review that contained concrete arguments and observations, providing a holistic insight into the conceptual nuances and methodological challenges facing mixed-race research. By being pointed in the right direction and being asked challenging and relevant questions about my research; I became more comfortable communicating and more confident in my research. Working closely with another person can be valuable in any project, particularly while working on complex issues. I have a very

democratic style of leadership, in which I place high value on clear communication and reaching decisions by consensus where possible.

Being able to target my passion and interest in race into a constructive research project was incredibly fulfilling. I achieved new heights of personal resilience through this. My area of research often required me to read sociological studies of discrimination and racial violence, I was not just working with quantifiable data but also with descriptive information from the lives of mixed-race people.

Part Two: Leadership Attributes and Personal Development

Much of the information contained within my research project was sensitive, nuanced and emotional. The greatest personal challenge I encountered was the large (almost paralysing) and often upsetting nature of my study. Using advice from my supervisor, and skills developed in the leadership development sessions I was able to persevere and strike a positive work-life balance. The fulfilling and dynamic nature of my research was also able to emphasise the importance and meaning to this perseverance. I have learned that I can repurpose my personal challenges to be fuel towards constructive benefits.

I found the online platform for leadership development sessions challenging, as it can be difficult fully engaging with interactive workshops remotely. As it can be hard to focus remotely, I found that participating as much as possible in online groupwork and doing pre-session work well in advance allowed me to enhance my focus. I found many of the skills I gained at these sessions invaluable and thoroughly practical. For instance, workshop with the Lir was hugely beneficial. This highlights the importance of how approaching these workshops with an open mind can be incredibly important. Despite the fact I was very comfortable with the topic, I was able to learn a lot, exercise my ability to focus during remote learning, and note how group leaders were able to keep participants engaged despite the online format.

I have most enjoyed the interactive nature of many of these workshops, which allowed me to learn from the invited experts as well as my peers. Though online interactions can be initially awkward, the use of Zoom breakout rooms, groupwork and group discussion allowed me to learn a lot and become comfortable articulating myself and managing groups in online settings. This is particularly relevant as it looks like online meetings and work environments will become increasingly common in this post-COVID era. These online meetings and workshops allowed me to develop a specific set of skills relevant to online leadership. Organising tasks, discussions and leading groups when you cannot meet in person can prove challenging. However, the experience of managing groups and forming friendships online has allowed me to understand the nuances of virtual leadership styles -for instance, engaging people at the beginning, asking for contributions, and structuring online discussions becomes even more important when you cannot meet in person. In order to fully operationalise any democratic form of leadership, it is necessary to ask for feedback continually, as people are less likely to volunteer their contributions when online.

In a group setting, my leadership style can be particularly beneficial, as it aims to be both inclusive and decisive. I value other people's input, and attempt to foster a democratic environment, as that makes the experience more enjoyable and productive. However, my experience on the Laidlaw Program has emphasised the importance of decisiveness when working to specific deadlines and timeframes. Therefore, taking initiative and trusting one's own instincts can be very important. The lead in making one's own decisions. I am also very action-based in my thinking I like to arrange solid plans for future and leave meetings with action-based task plans, which can be useful for directing a group.

Conclusion: Areas for Expansion

Next summer, I hope to further improve my communication skills. Predominately I have so far worked on written and verbal communication, however with the development of the documentary,

visual research communication will be improved on. I also hope to improve my inter-personal and interview skills through the development and creation of interviews.