

Reflection on Laidlaw Summer Experiences 2020-2021: Research and Leadership in Action Projects

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Research Experience: A Challenging Start

For my Laidlaw research project, I investigated the interplay of social media and citizen activism in the authoritarian countries of China and Singapore. Despite creating an ambitious weekly and daily research schedule, my first two weeks of research started off on a challenging note. For instance, the books I had ordered for my first two weeks of literature review not only arrived two weeks late, but some never even made it to my doorstep. As a result, my entire 6-weeks of research had to be readjusted to make up for the lost time.

In addition to this delay, it took me longer than I expected to adjust to this new way of working. In particular, on some days I struggled with a lack of purpose and motivation. A key reason why I felt a lack of purpose was due to the research process: How do I know what to read? How do I know when I have gathered enough information and data? There seemed to be a degree of circularity in the data collection process, which, in my case, was reading. I needed to do more readings on my topic and navigate the literature in order to structure my thoughts and make

conclusions. At times, however, it seemed that the literature was too broad and too wide, a constantly evolving research topic that had no clear limit. While struggling in my research process, I was also taking summer school classes and preparing for my move to Toronto. It was quite challenging to strike a balance between all of these activities that were happening simultaneously. I knew I could not overcome this challenge alone.

Thus, I went to my Laidlaw coordinator and my research supervisor for support and guidance. My coordinator said that it can be difficult and discouraging reading a large book for long periods of time, feeling like I am not getting through the material quickly. That was it. I needed to change my reading dynamic. Her strategy was to alternate between reading shorter research articles and books. After taking her advice, my days were more refreshing because it felt like I was actually making progress in my research. Moreover, she emphasized the importance of post-reading work, such as summarizing my research, relating topics to one another, and to simply sit with the material that I have read. I was able to combine passive reading and active thinking, thus improving my analysis, investigation, interpretation skills throughout the research process.

After discussing the struggles I had with my supervisor, he suggested that I send him a summary of the books and research articles I have read over the past two weeks for him to review. He was able to draw out key ideas from my research and direct me to focus more in-depth on the nuances within those topics. He challenged me with questions and the areas in which I should investigate further. Through the support and guidance of my coordinator and supervisor, I have learned how to build motivation and develop efficient methods for this kind of literature-based research.

On a personal note, I decide to set up a “Michelle 1:1” at the end of each week of research. During this one-on-one meeting with myself, I would evaluate my progress, the challenges I faced, how I overcame them, as well as discuss areas for improvement for the following week.

Learning to Accept Change

Although the first few weeks of research proved to be challenging, I was able to continue persevering with these strategies in mind for the following weeks of research. With the support

of others, I was able to overcome obstacles, accept the present circumstances, and adjust to life in this new city. All in all, despite the difficulties I have faced during my research journey, I have learned to maintain a positive mindset; I still feel like my research topic is impactful, relevant, and worthwhile. That is definitely something to be proud of.



Makesense & Re_Action for Education Program Summer 2020

Taking Action and Forming Global Partnerships

Last summer, I alongside Laidlaw Scholars across Canada, the US, and the UK, had worked with the nonprofit organization, Makesense, to create the pilot program called Re_Action for Education. The program’s goal was to help parents, teachers, and students transition to remote learning by providing training, tutoring, and logistical support. During this leadership in action experience, I established a partnership with two Laidlaw Scholars from the US. Together, we created a website named TE(a)CH, which provides tech support for teachers, students and families so they can continue learning and connecting with one another during the virtual education era. Going into the Re_Action for Education program, I just wanted to help people and make some sort of contribution to my community. Little did I know that, by inadvertently following the design thinking process, we were able to empathize with our community, define their needs, ideate innovative solutions, create a prototype, and finally test our solutions.¹ We began with an idea, then we plunged right into it. In a matter of days, we created TE(a)CH.

Global Change, Local Impact

One of my biggest takeaways from my first leadership in action experience is epitomized by the Makesense mantra, “alone we go faster, but together we go further”— the idea that building partnerships can help form an ecosystem of problem solvers who want to find a solution on a global scale. Through these peer-to-peer exchanges, I was trained to become a more proactive leader. Because each Laidlaw Scholar came with a different world perspective, we were able to use a grand panoply of collective intelligence to find a global solution to a global problem.

¹ Teo Yu Siang, “What Is Design Thinking?,” The Interaction Design Foundation.

Youth Assisting Youth & Future Program Summer 2021

A Continuation of Leadership in Education

For my second summer, I chose to continue to pursue the path of leadership in education. However, in contrast to the previous summer, I wanted to focus on creating local change in my own community in the city of Toronto. In partnership with the nonprofit organization, Youth Assisting Youth, I had the opportunity to create and subsequently lead the Future program, a 6-part workshop series dedicated to helping youth in underserved communities across the city of Toronto and York Region. Through the power of mentorship, our goal for the pilot program was to connect at-risk youth to enriching leadership experiences, including academic development and capacity building.

Local Change, Global Impact

Reflecting on my leadership in action experience this summer, I realized that making change on a local level is all about support, connection and inspiration. In contrast to the top-down approach to finding global solutions to global problems, local action from the bottom-up is beneficial even if it does not become a worldwide movement. In particular, it can help community partners respond to specific concerns and achieve effective results. I had the opportunity to build and advance collaborative relationships between entities including Youth Assisting Youth, the Laidlaw Foundation, and the University of Toronto. Ultimately, these partnerships have the potential to play a role in catalyzing a vision to empower young people to make a difference in the world.

Concluding Remarks

As I look back on my work over the two summers and my initial Laidlaw application, it is evident that I have come a long way since starting the scholarship. Over the course of two summers, I have developed analytical and investigative research skills, created a resource to reduce inequality in education, and piloted a program to train the next generation of change-makers. Notably, I've gained leadership as well as research and project management skills, which have been invaluable in both my personal and academic life, and have learned the importance of always putting myself in a position where I can only move forward.

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