

A reflective essay focusing on my leadership development

My application process was rough. The result of peer pressure, stress, and the kindness and patience of several St Andrews academics, my application was hurled onto the website the day before the window closed. I expected to hear no more and was therefore exhausted and enraged when I received a call for interview. “I’m not the kind of person who gets Laidlaw,” I told my long-suffering mum. “My grades aren’t good enough. I can’t talk the talk. It’s all just a waste of time.” Covid and lockdown had taken a toll on my confidence, and it wasn’t a great time to realise I had deleted my application from my computer. My flatmate, Pati, and I coached one another with interview questions – her suggestions were far more helpful than mine – and I met one more time with my supervisor to hear her advice. The interviews went well, and I found myself, to my intense surprise, feeling hopeful. When my acceptance email arrived, I was just about to start a tutorial with my supervisor. We stayed on the call to celebrate.

It dawned on me then – I *was* the sort of person who gets Laidlaw. I was *exactly* that sort of person. In subsequent emails, the full scope of the scholarship became clear to me. To have a group of people decide my work and I deserved backing, for so long, and with such an investment, made me feel almost important. I was being taken seriously.

Due to Covid, my first leadership weekend took place online. However, I found myself enjoying the sessions far more than I expected. I appreciated teaming up with Tufts university, and the shortened days (to accommodate for time zones and screen fatigue) made the process extremely painless. My research began and I was excited. When my supervisor suggested I take a fortnight to read before choosing a specific direction, I could

hardly believe it. This kind of investment in my work, both financially and temporally, still seems like a one-off, for which I will be eternally grateful.

Not only did my research prove incredibly interesting, but it has gone on to help with my academic life within the university. I have a much, much wider knowledge of the Classical world now than I did before starting Laidlaw. Being able to do my own research led me to discover the field of Classical Receptions, which has become the focus of my interest. My supervisor, who took me for a few tutorials last year, also commented that she could see the improvement I'd made in my engagement with sources since beginning Laidlaw. I'm a joint honours student, and most of us at St Andrews don't go on to write dissertations.

Because of Laidlaw, I don't feel like I'm missing out. I've conducted research before and feel like my understanding is good enough to approach a master's courses without a dissertation if I ever decide to take that route. My grades are better now too, which is always a bonus.

The academic year also brought further Laidlaw leadership trainings. The trip to Hospitalfields provided a wonderful opportunity to get a taste of the residential trip Covid had scuppered in 2021 and meet the 2022 cohort. It felt strange to be acting as mentors to them when they already seemed so accomplished, but we did our best. I appreciated learning more about leadership styles and how different approaches could be best suited to certain tasks, not so much as a 'personality type' quiz, but as a guide for what skills we should all draw on to fulfil whatever roles the future may bring. Most of all, however, I appreciated the Laidlaw team's empathy by giving us a day focus on meeting everyone and having some time to relax after Covid had created a pretty isolating few years. I'm really glad I was given the opportunity to meet the other scholars from my cohort who had chosen to do self-defined projects on this trip. We talked about our plans and the difficulties, and it

made me feel much better about being a little bit awkward about my project and gave me the confidence to approach the bumps which were presenting themselves along the way. I think a lot of the confidence I gained from doing the scholarship came just from seeing how impressive all my peers were. Someone had looked at me in an interview and decided I counted as one of them! Hearing everyone's incredible summer plans made me feel like I could do important things too.

Leadership styles were brought up again at the next leadership day, which I had been looking forward to because it took place outside! It was hilarious to see that not one of my cohort identified first and foremost as a 'team player' in their leadership style, which perhaps makes sense since the first year project was so wholly independent, and, thanks to Covid, isolated. Judging by the people in my cohort, however, and particularly by our behaviour in teams over the day, I'd say a lot of us have 'team player' pretty near the top of our profiles, even if it wasn't the first choice. I think the sessions we took part in on this trip were especially helpful. It was really bonding discussing with my team about unconscious biases, particularly our own, and the 'Case of the Injured Cyclists' proved particularly challenging, requiring us to make tough decisions altogether in a manner I found useful. Usually, decisions I've made as part of a team have been about font size or assigning tasks. The issue we debated in this exercise involved two injured cyclists, only one of whom we could save. It allowed us to pull together as a team when it really mattered. We managed to remain extremely respectful and calm throughout, and I found myself respecting my teammates for that and trusting them.

In the first year of Laidlaw, I learnt to take myself seriously, developed faith enough to hold real ambition, and scrapped the subconscious belief of a lifetime – that speaking up would

make me 'bossy', and that was a fate worse than death. The second summer built on this new-found confidence. I'd always favoured a below-the-parapet style of leadership. In Roman terms, I took after Agrippina – so far without assassination. The Leadership in Action project required a bolder approach. I was well and truly forced out of my comfort zone when I devised, set up, and conducted my own Classics outreach workshops.

The process was not without its trials. The leadership aspect of Laidlaw had been the reason I had wanted to apply. I had taken some oracy and drama workshops in a school in my hometown the year before I began university and the experience had stayed with me as something which had revealed the extent of cultural and educational deprivation in rural areas, especially those in the north. This realisation was only compounded by my experiences at university. I was one of very few people from the area lucky enough to be given the riches of further education, and I wanted to use the opportunity to bring some of them back to the place I grew up. However, when the 'overseas element' of the scholarship was introduced, this plan had to be scrapped. I remain incredibly grateful to my supervisor and Laidlaw's Celina O'Connor for humouring my slightly emotional negotiations.

In the end, a solution was reached. I attended the Ghent university conference for teaching Latin and Greek at primary level and moved the reach of my workshops to northern Scotland rather than Northumberland. It was a wrench, but one which managed to stay in line with my hopes for bolstering UK curricula in rural areas. I think I gained a lot from the experience, not in the least realising that compromise was not only possible, but also something I could be happy with. I have a reputation for stubbornness.

Ensuing admin machinations were a shock, and one from which I think gained a huge amount. Juggling expenses claims, risk assessments, dates, targeted benchmarks, and

meetings proved a full-time job in itself, and at first I found this disheartening. “I haven’t had time to do any of my project,” I told my supervisor in our first meeting of the summer. She smiled, suggesting I was now well prepared for academia. Now, I think the admin side of leadership is incredibly vital, and one which until that point I had never truly realised. I have a newfound respect for anyone who tries to organise anything nowadays, and I consider it far better to be prepared.

Mostly however, I think I learnt the importance of trusting the process. Days before I was scheduled to travel to my one-and-only confirmed gig in Shetland, where I would find no accommodation or return ferry awaiting, everything came together. Three more schools got in contact, one of the teachers offered to put me up, and a window opened in the return slots for the ferry. The email came through five minutes into my supervisor meeting. It couldn’t have been better timed.

I had a fabulous time in Shetland. The people were lovely, and so, so welcoming, and the pupils I taught were a dream. It was nerve-wracking at first, running the sessions while feeling so underqualified. But pretty much as soon as each session began, I found it incredibly natural. I’ve been a tutor for five years, and, as I said, have taught in other schools; I think the main focus of my nerves revolved around the project being entirely of my own design, and the activities and aim entirely my own; I was vulnerable to criticism.

However, since I took the sessions, I’ve received lots of positive feedback from teachers, and during the sessions the kids were hugely engaged. I had always known they would be, really – what’s not to love about acting out monsters, running around outside, and dressing up in period costume? They seemed to really enjoy the subversive side of the message I was giving in the sessions, which centred on the interrogation of the hero Odysseus, and

considering his behaviour from the side of the monsters. Debates were lively and insightful, and most children were happy to explain how the workshop had made them think differently about the story by each session's close.

I learnt many things from giving the sessions, not least quite a few pieces of Shetland dialect. I learnt teaching these kinds of workshops was a task I could do with great ease and enjoyment. However, I also learnt it could easily become very isolating, and required a huge amount of energy. I don't get my energy from teaching, I get it from learning, and I didn't feel I was learning anything more by repeating the sessions after the third group. I had considered taking on this kind of role as a career, and while I would definitely not rule it out for the future, it would certainly have to be something I undertook as part of a team, where I could be heavily involved in research and creation alongside giving the sessions. Before I began Laidlaw, I had considered searching for an existing charity which involved itself in educational outreach. Laidlaw has given me the opportunity to try this out, both through my own project and other events. Through the Laidlaw network I've already been involved in this kind of work, including a charity drive for reading storybooks to primary age children. I hope to be involved in more of this sort of thing short-term.

After completing the scholarship, and being given this experience, I no longer feel I must seek out an existing charity for this kind of outreach. If I wanted, I think I could probably set up my own. I would never have had the confidence and ambition to even consider this option weren't it for the networks I've built through this scholarship and the trust Laidlaw put in me by taking me on.

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