



CATULLAN IDENTITIES

A Reflective Report on Community and Leadership

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Introduction: Community and Leadership

The greater part of my university experience has been massively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic which started halfway through my second semester in my first year. In other words, I spent the majority of my university experience online and physically isolated – in a country that is not my home country and a language that is not my first language. On account of this, loneliness is an emotion and state I have spent a great amount of time thinking about. While the experience of loneliness in this unique suspension of time during those two+ years has often been described as a collectively shared phenomenon, I believe that the experience could not possibly be captured by a generalising term due to its unique nature of taking place on an individual, internal level. While the timelines of these (individual) experiences correspond within a collective dimension, the spaces of this experience of loneliness are fragmented into individual, internal pockets of subjective experiences. That being said, there is a paradoxical tension between the unified chronology of this experience and the divergence of the spaces where this experience is located. The gaps between those spaces – individual consciousnesses – cannot be bridged due to the nature of the experience itself, physical isolation, in order for a sense of community to emerge from and transcend the collective timeline.

Or can they? Is this even the question we want to ask? These thoughts are based on the assumption that the panacea to loneliness is community. But how do we distinguish between a mere assemblage of people, a collective, and a community that (in these reflections) originates from a kit among its members that goes beyond factual similarities and commonalities? What makes community an antidote to loneliness?

My craving for a sense of community during the peak of isolation in 2020 was not only prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2020 I came out as transgender, a decision that was the result of the prolonged amount of time I had at my disposal since the beginning of the pandemic to fundamentally reconsider how I want to move through the world and what identity means to me. While this decision lifted a major weight from my shoulders, the sensation of relief was also tinged by an unexpected sadness. I was suddenly a “newbie” in the trans community that I was unable to participate in in-person. I felt excited about this newly discovered part of myself and wanted to share this pride but had nowhere to channel it into – and nobody to exchange it with. Abstractly speaking, I was part of the trans community of trans people in the world, but effectively I felt just as isolated as before.

With this long introduction to my reflections on my leadership journey as a Laidlaw scholar, I wanted to introduce the term of community and how it underpins my understanding of leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic not only impacted my experiences as a Laidlaw scholar in very practical ways, but permeated my every thought along that journey in a way that

makes it impossible for me to extract the one from the other. Similarly, leadership for me is inherently rooted in how I relate to community as a result of this experience.

Summer 2021: Leadership in Isolation

Applying for the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme, I was particularly excited about the opportunity to conduct a research project by myself under the supervision of an academic. Earlier in that semester (first semester of my second year) I had come across the ancient Roman poet Catullus in a Latin module with Dr Henry Stead who eventually became my Laidlaw supervisor. Reading the poems of Catullus became a major part in my coming to terms with and embracing my trans identity. As I mentioned above, there was barely any physical sense of community for me at that time that I could share my experiences with – Catullus became my companion throughout that time. Based on these experiences, I decided to focus my research project on queer adaptations of Catullus' poetry.

When I applied to the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme, the term 'leadership' felt even more abstract to me than the craving for community. I am afraid that neither of these associations changed after my first leadership weekend which was held entirely online. My cohort consisted of 24 digital little tiles on my laptop screen representing their initials.

Based on my research, I created the collaborative arts project *Catullan Identities* that encouraged people to respond to Catullus' poems in a creative way and to submit their own adaptations of the poems to the project. In combination with the research I had done, my idea was to create a transcultural, atemporal community of queer voices that are connected by Catullus' poetry. I only later realised that I essentially recreated an approach to forming community similar to the one I had experienced during the pandemic: a chronologically specific (all of the adaptations were created during the summer of 2021) projection of an internal experience (the reception of Catullus' poems) into a digital space. Is this community? I am not entirely sure if this pictorial assemblage did express this kit of belonging in a lasting, sustainable way. I greatly enjoyed it nevertheless.

In retrospect, I also see that these personal experiences bled into my reception of the Laidlaw leadership events at that time as well. As I was conducting my research still physically isolated, the only context to which I found myself being able to apply what I learned during the leadership weekends was myself, paradoxically. I had great difficulties at the beginning of my project to go about the organisation of it constructively and not get lost in time management, details, and my initial goal. For this reason, I tried to apply different leadership styles to the way I found myself torn between conflicting parts of my brain. Viewing my brain as a team of different types of people – some of which are more creative,

but chaotic, and some of which need structure and are more resilient – ultimately helped me stay on track with my project with sustained attention and a steady goal.

Ultimately, my first summer of the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme did not only give me a unique opportunity to gain invaluable research skills and to practise time management and learning skills – as I had originally hoped for when I applied in the first place. Even though I was still far from how I relate to leadership now, the term leadership became a more graspable concept than it had been at the beginning of the programme. Extracting approaches to resourcefulness, inspiration, and group organisation from it ultimately formed the crucial step to how I grew to relate to the term later.

A change of direction in my reflections on both leadership and community was prompted by a presentation by Laidlaw alumnus Tom Burdge about leadership and anarchy. I found my thoughts on what community and belonging mean in a context that extracted the term leadership from its abstract position within corporate jargon, political and ideological iconography, and mono-heroic narratives. Instead, Tom dissolved it in the concept of communal organisation and vertical power diffusion. For the first time, I saw the interconnection of ‘community’ and ‘leadership’ within one realm; I started to think of leadership as an umbrella term that describes relations and dynamics in group organisation based on appreciation, resourcefulness, and inspiration – and ultimately a tool of forging solidarity that would unlock access to empowerment especially for marginalised groups.

Catullan Identities 2022: Community in Action

Despite my initial doubts about the effectiveness of my online project *Catullan Identities*, I ended up receiving a lot of positive feedback. At that time, UK media reported on waves of hatred against queer people, specifically trans people, to an extent and with an intensity that had barely been witnessed before. I will not get any further into the specific details of TERF (trans-exclusive radical feminists) rhetoric, but I would like to point out that this line of hateful rhetoric is unlike previous forms of transphobia and oddly unique to the UK. Either way, the sheer omnipresence of transphobia coupled with my thoughts on how community and leadership can forge this tool for political organisation, I then decided to take my approach from the *Catullan Identities* project a step further: by running creative queer workshops on adapting Catullus’ poetry in-person in different parts of Scotland. The idea behind this was to meet transphobia with a strong sense of community – community as an emotional space of belonging that allows for pride and queer joy to be born despite the overwhelming presence of hatred.

Organising the workshops was one of the most challenging things I have ever done. As I mentioned previously, I have struggled a lot with organisational skills and time management in the past. Even though they had already greatly improved over my first Laidlaw summer in 2021, I had never taken on a project that would require that extent of planning and organisation in advance. The most difficult aspect about this was that, since I had never done anything like this before, I had no reference whatsoever that would help me gauge the extent and time frame of this undertaking; the task mentally conflated to this huge impossible project. I first started by posting about the idea on social media in various groups and ended up interviewing some activists and artists who had made experiences with running workshops in early 2022. I eventually came across Helm Arts, an organisation that provides administrative support for aspiring artists. The initial help that was provided by them was invaluable to me as they walked me through steps I needed to consider and provided a general roadmap. Unfortunately, the person from Helm Arts who helped me organise venues, fell ill very suddenly at the beginning of June. Due to a series of unfortunate events, I found myself having to start all over again with the organisation of venues which delayed my entire plan by two months. Despite my frustration about this, the eventually fruitful organisation of the workshops ended up being a lot easier than it had felt months before. Going back to different leadership styles, I realised that I greatly benefit from observing other people's behaviour which I then adapt and transform in a way that caters towards my specific goals. I greatly value organisation, even though it does not come naturally to me.

The most important takeaways from my Leadership-in-Action project however are my observations of community organisation. While I received a lot of interest online and quite a few people had RSVP'd, only about 50% showed up for the first two workshops. The greatest disappointment was that none of the eight people that had signed up for the workshop in Kirkcaldy showed up. To be fair, three people reached out to me that day about being stuck in public transport (due to rail strikes) which inhibited them from coming to Kirkcaldy. Talking with venue organisers and being in touch with activists however, I learned that the cultural sector has been struggling to re-gain strength post-pandemic. The current economic crisis further adds to this – many people cut down on cultural expenses first, as they are considered a luxury.

I am very worried about the large-scale decline of mental health that has been covered by various media and studies in the recent past. Throughout my time of organising the workshops, I have experienced many delays and dead ends because I was unable to reach people I had been in touch with before. Several times, I found that I had to start all over again with introductions or simply try a different road entirely. I think that the next few years are going to give birth to approaches to fundamentally re-considering our relationship to work and mental wellbeing – which is an incredibly important topic to consider. And yet, I also

believe that this is going to be a messy process. 2022 has witnessed a long-unseen level of political action through strikes in various sectors – testimonies of collective organisation. That being said, immediate issues do help bridge those gaps of loneliness. And yet, I ultimately wonder where the line between pandemic-induced paralysis and anger-fuelled collective action brought about by the current crises is. Is the crucial tipping point where effective leadership comes in?

Conclusion

I am not sure if I can answer these questions yet. I wonder if I ever will. In the end, those people who did participate in my workshops expressed that they greatly enjoyed them as safe, creative spaces. The workshop in Edinburgh turned out incredibly successful with more than 10 people joining. I collaged all of the artworks that were produced during the workshops into a Zine that will soon be available to view online and that I will print out for further distribution. Even if I only reached one person, I succeeded in what I hoped to achieve.

Going back to the development of my relationship with the term leadership, I noticed that it has fundamentally changed from one of abstract unrelatability to a surprising omnipresence that permeates my day-to-day interactions. I find that the meaning(s) I extracted from the term throughout the past 18 months are applicable in so many ways: internally to my own organisation as well as in my thoughts and worries about the current socio-political and economic time I live and participate in. Thinking about how I want to move through the world and what my identity means to me is a frustrating process and yet also gives rise to joy that is just as rewarding. While community sparks a sense of belonging – whatever form this may take – thinking about leadership is ultimately about a process of becoming. Becoming aware of (social) responsibility, becoming determined, becoming passionate. Becoming a person as part of various communities.

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