

Laidlaw 1st Summer Reflection

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Word Count: 1984

Going into my Laidlaw research project I was very sure of my research question and was committed to completing it in the given 6 weeks and answering the question in full. In reality, I finished my research project in around 8 weeks and I changed my research question numerous times as I discovered new information about my research area. This panicked me, to begin with as I believed that I felt like I was doing something wrong as I didn't have all of the answers from the very beginning. What I learnt as I continued was that this was not the case at all. In the beginning, I envisioned my research to be an affirmation of the base assumption that I thought would be the answer to my question. As my supervisor would teach me, it is the opposite. Research is the questioning of your own beliefs and the status quo which presents itself to you as you dive deeper into it. The fact that I needed extra time and that I wasn't ending up in the direction I assumed I'd be in made me think I was failing. This wasn't the case, and taught me to trust the process of research and allowed me to develop resilience. Although I wasn't seeing tangible results each day, I knew I was learning. If this work went exactly as I thought it would, then it wouldn't have been the challenge that taught me so much.

I was lucky enough to have an amazing supervisor to support me through the process. There was never any issue with me emailing him with very basic questions like if the book I was using was a credible source or if he thought I was going in the correct direction with my studies. I don't think I would have completed my research project without Dr Cian O'Callaghan's reassurance that this is just how research works, that it rarely goes to plan. We met officially every 2 weeks but in reality, we met more frequently, whenever I was stuck on something or when he was introducing me to a colleague who could help me with my work. I think the fact that we chose our supervisors aided in the comfortability of research support. In the beginning, I felt awkward asking questions that I assumed were stupid but after a while, since I knew Cian from having classes with him before, it made it much easier to ask him about anything. This sped up my progress drastically I believe because without it I think there would have been far more days where nothing gets done because of a fear of annoying him looking for guidance.

Additionally, I carried out 4 individual interviews for my research, to help me get a qualitative primary source. They were representatives from the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, the Peter McVerry Trust, the Ana Liffey Drug Project and Dublin County Council. Admittedly it was intimidating reaching out to each of the organisations without any previous affiliations with them. This is especially difficult when dealing with the 'imposter syndrome' which comes along with being a student researcher. Once I did begin my interviews I found that they were not as difficult or daunting as I previously thought. Each individual I spoke to was kind and understanding of any gaps in knowledge I had and at the of the day they were there to educate and help me. It was extremely interesting to get the input of area experts on the topic of homelessness. It quickly became apparent that although we can get academic and numerical data on humanitarian issues like these, it is extremely difficult to comprehend the gravity of them unless you have had first-hand exposure to the issue. Their opinions and views didn't stray too far from where my research

was going but the critiques of the system in place and the actual flaws in these systems which would only be recognised by a practitioner was invaluable. Logistically, I found missing data the most difficult to deal with. It was confusing and difficult to deal with when graphing my findings to discover that an area was not covered or simply absent. This was something that I had to learn to deal with as it appears to be rampant in the area of homeless services. Occasionally I would reach out to whichever public body had published the relevant studies etc. but it was never too common to get a response to an email like that. This kind of repetitive task with little benefits is exactly what can beat down a new researcher. Luckily again, I had my supervisor to guide me and spur me on. He directed me to sites and resources which contained some of the missing information I need. He encouraged me to keep going and working past the gap and helped me realise that a small hole in an otherwise vast sea of information isn't the end of the world. In the end, it taught me a lot about determination and overcoming self-doubt.

The most difficult part of this project by far was the fact that it was self-led. Never before have I had a task where the work is completely dependent on me. From the subject matter to the methodology. There is no grading and very little monitoring. It was difficult to get into a rhythm and determination of getting my Laidlaw project done. In the end, this turned out to be the worst and also the best part of the project. Why? Firstly, It thought me so much about how I like to work and how I work most effectively. I learnt that I am not a "sit at a desk from 9 to 5 with a one hour break in between" kind of person. I scheduled my day around what made me most energised and most likely to complete the work I set myself. I'd often start quite early around 7 am and work intensely for about 2 hours, this was when I would take a break and have breakfast or watch TV or just do something where I didn't have to think for a while. After this, I would usually go back to work for another 2 hours and then I would rinse and repeat that process. This taught me just exactly what kind of person I was and helped me get rid of the guilt I usually would feel for not being the type of person that just works intensely for hours on end. This is because I proved to myself that I could be productive on my schedule. Finally, this allowed me to keep a relatively normal summer social schedule. I could easily pop out for an hour or two and get a coffee with a friend without missing anything because I knew that I would get that work done when I got home.

What surprised me the most during the duration of this project was how difficult it was to maintain a consistent level of motivation. As I discussed earlier, I soon learned to listen to my body and just take breaks when I needed to but separate from my energy levels I found my determination levels dwindling especially getting to the mid/end period of my project. Perhaps it was because of the fatigue of research or maybe it was something else but I had to work to keep myself motivated and willing to keep pushing on with my research project. Additionally, I was a bit surprised at how isolating research can be. It can get lonely when you are in your room reading academic articles and grey literature for weeks on end. Eventually, I solved this by learning to work around my bodies schedule instead of just working under a strict timeframe. Still, it felt odd just reading and taking notes and compiling my collection of data. I had never before done any work which was even remotely anti-social. This taught me the value of having social outlets, without them I think it is far too easy to fall into a poor mental state.

I think the main form of leadership I displayed during this research project was a form of self-determination and leading by example. It was difficult to keep working on my own but knowing that I had to and constantly reminding myself of the goal at the end kept me in line and dedicated to the work. I think this is an attitude shared by many of the Laidlaw scholars and something that we discussed during our ALS discussions. Talking with one another and recognising that we were all in the same boat, facing the same issues worked as a way to help us all move forward. Seeing each other powering through the difficult bits and leading by example helped everyone else do the same. I think that this is the prominent form of leadership shown. Additionally, I think leadership was displayed through taking initiative in contacting key stakeholders and also in the persistent communication I kept with my supervisor to ensure I was on track throughout the project.

After completing this project I have come to realise that leadership is not a quality that is only synonymous with large group activities led by a singular individual. It is a series of attributes that can be displayed in any number of circumstances. This research project has made me reassess what I believe a leader is. I think a leader is someone who can work towards their independent goals through adaptive and determined means. They are someone who doesn't work for recognition or only when people are looking at them but work for their reasons and will do it even when not being praised. I think a leader is someone who isn't self-invested and who doesn't work to serve their interests, they're someone who looks further than just wealth and prestige and is driven by more than traditional "success".

It is funny to me how a word like leadership can be thrown around so commonly yet very few of us have our definition for it. Laidlaw has been the first time I've had to question what it is to be a leader. Up until now, I have only really thought of stereotypical leaders, presidents, CEOs, team captains but now I'm beginning to realise that others lead in very different ways. Those CEOs and Presidents would not have any direction if they were not led by their lower down workers. It's important to recognise the leadership attributes in everyone around us and not only give praise or recognition to the person with the loudest voice or the one who is at the forefront of a project.

Although I do think I've learnt a lot about myself, my approach to leadership and my role as a leader from my Laidlaw experience so far I do think I have a long way to go before I recognise what kind of lead I want to be. I know my passions and I have enjoyed completing my research project but it has made me question what my goals are in life and if they align with what I want to self-actualise into. Much of my experience and knowledge lies in housing and homelessness and once upon a time I did think I would go into research and implementation in this sector but now I am not as sure. I don't know if this is where I should be or if research-based leadership is the best way for me to use my talents for good. As I mentioned earlier, I am a social person and I felt that research often drained me and my chances to interact with others. I think I need a social outlet in my work and from now on that will be something I am looking for in any future projects I take on.