

Summer 1 Reflective Report

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## **Introduction**

The gleaming Scholars' network is an inspiring and creative space, but we all know how the story of social media goes. It can be so overwhelming and exhausting to see the shiny new products that seem whole and complete without seeing the endless hours of research and grit (and rest!) behind all of the work. I hope for my reflection to be a transparent invitation for myself and other scholars – both past and prospective – to reflect on and acknowledge the growth that has led us to where we are now, and the growth that will lead us to where we will go. It isn't always glamorous, but a life without challenge never makes for much of an interesting story!

## **Research**

Although hesitant to mention the pandemic, it would be misleading to ignore the sheer impact that it has had on every aspect of our lives over the past year (almost two!). The total shift to the online world meant that deadlines, tasks, assignments, and meetings were constantly encroaching on personal space and rest. By the end of the college year, it was difficult to feel any sort of control over what was happening. As a result, the process of choosing to apply to the programme of my own volition and then independently following through the stages was a surreal one. Everything had seemed so up in the air, but I suddenly found myself sitting before an interview panel that was ready to listen to what I had to say, and ready to engage in enthusiastic conversation about something that I was equally as excited to share with them.

I had spent a lot of time thinking in hypotheticals up to that point, so to be given the opportunity and trust to become a part of the programme and conduct my own research sent my feelings of imposter syndrome off the charts. Being faced with free rein and the actual beginning of my own proposed project was exciting, but very daunting. Dr Bernice M. Murphy of Trinity's School of English provided me with monumental support before even beginning the programme, grounding me from the get-go and helping me to anchor my

thoughts and ideas. She also helped me to remember the value in my work when it seemed to be shrouded in mist.

Something that surprised me about working with an academic supervisor was the active process of building a relationship. This was likely heightened by the pandemic as well, where all of our meetings took place over Zoom. But what surprised me the most was really that I found that the process required a lot more trust and confidence than I had initially expected. Part of the research process, I learned, was becoming comfortable with throwing ideas out into the open and being ready to sometimes have them absolutely obliterated. Prior to this summer, I prided myself on being someone who openly expressed their views and ideas, but I am now able to recognise that in reality I had been keeping a lot of ideas to myself for the fear of them being too “out there” or unachievable. Dr Murphy helped me to hash out this process and even come to value it. Though it was something that I had previously acknowledged in theory, this summer of research has allowed me to experience it first-hand and fully understand the importance and impact of failure. Through becoming comfortable with the discomfort of sharing wild ideas despite the risk of rejection, I have come to embrace the fact that sometimes it is certain so-called failures that give way to the development of new and innovative solutions and thoughts.

Something in particular that I truly appreciate about working with Dr Murphy is that whilst she is always been kind and willing to work through ideas, she is careful and maintains a continuously neutral and objective position in our conversations so as not to sway or influence any of my initial thought processes. During the summer of research it was scary at times to feel like I was in freefall without someone watching over my shoulder, but it was truly liberating to have had the opportunity and wiggle room to make mistakes and to work through the stages of problem solving and adapting on my own. At times frustrating, but ultimately more rewarding once I had reached an accomplishment that I could acknowledge

as my own hard work. Dr Murphy's approach helped me to feel trusted and respected as a fully independent researcher, which is something that I had perhaps not fully expected or previously encountered to this extent as an undergraduate.

Dr Murphy could use her expertise to spot potential gaps in my research question and to identify and point out to me which ideas I had were under/over-researched and at what levels. This helped me to bring my research proposal back to the drawing board and really engage in deeper thought about what it was I wanted to examine and research. I found that one thing was consistent throughout each and every phase of the project's development – what mattered to me in my work was not so much the research of specific literary features or themes in isolation, but rather how and why the literature and its themes and features are relevant in the ways they impact, tie into, and reflect on everyday life and the political climate. This remains true. This broad scope, for me, helps to connect research with people and their lived experiences.

Something that I found increasingly challenging throughout the duration of the six-week research period was the all-consuming nature of my research. I found it increasingly difficult to switch off and think about things other than the project, and the lines between reading for my own personal pleasure and reading for research became very blurred. It was important for me to distinguish very clearly the differences between reading critically for work and reading for relaxation, something that was quite difficult given the fact that I also enjoyed what I was reading for research. I taught myself to establish certain boundaries and keep certain reading practices for one mode or the other. For example, I tried not to annotate books that I was reading for pleasure and took photographs of quotes I enjoyed rather than sticky-tabling and underlining them. These seemed like silly habits to create, but I now know not to downplay practical solutions, and they ultimately ended up being very helpful in making things clear for my brain to understand, and therefore allowing me to relax a bit

more. Of course, it transpired that a lot of the time what I was reading for study did also end up being reading for pleasure, and I had to compromise with myself on this. But overall, I aimed to stop at a certain point of the day or night when I felt that I was becoming overtired.

Concluding my research and beginning to construct its outputs proved to be an exercise that reinforced my beliefs and helped me to clarify what exactly it is that I value in this work. I enjoyed compiling notes and writing in an essay format – it allowed me to explore different avenues to my heart’s content and later take the time to finetune the final product. I could elaborate upon arguments and involve more scholarship and criticism. Creating a poster, on the other hand, was not a pleasant experience for me. It was challenging to condense information into a presentable A3 format. But ultimately, I realised the sheer importance of the skill of presenting information in a variety of ways so that the essence of the work can reach as many people as possible. Research, for me, only holds intrinsic value if it can be shared with and understood by others.

Going forward in terms of research, something I would definitely like to do more of is reach out to more literary research communities. This summer has shown me that I am capable of undertaking independent projects. At the beginning of the programme, I spent a lot of time lurking in Arts & Humanities social Discord discussion boards watching and listening – I didn’t feel qualified or experienced enough to weigh in on the conversation. I have since built up the confidence to insert and assert myself in academic spaces, to contribute to discussions and to learn from others. As many teachers often say, “if you are asking yourself the question, it is likely that someone else in the room is too.” I believe that an important part of leadership and building communities is being willing to be the person in the room to ask the question, or weigh in with a certain perspective or thought.

I would never have dreamed of signing up to attend a literary conference as an undergraduate student. I would have watched others and longed to have done the same, much

like I looked at the Laidlaw scholars of years gone by back in December of 2020 before I had applied. But with the developed confidence following Summer 1 of the programme, and Dr Murphy's encouragement, I attended my first symposium. I can proudly say that I have accomplished my initial goal outlined in my Personal Development Plan – to be open in voicing my ambitions. Now, I am excited to use this newfound confidence to progress in research and connect with other people who are following similar – and varying – paths to share and learn, and perhaps to collaborate on new and exciting interdisciplinary projects.

### **Personal Development**

There is a Māori proverb that goes as following: “He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata” [What is the most important thing in the world? It is the people, it is the people, it is the people]. Having gone through the application process during one of the many heights of the pandemic, I had prepared myself for an isolated experience of research and a series of Zoom leadership workshops that would each finish with a cohort of twenty-odd scholars shutting their laptop screens to find themselves alone again, wherever they may be. I can now say, in complete earnest, that the one true joy of this experience so far has been the people of the programme. From the very beginning, my peers on the programme reached out to me and in turn inspired me to do the same with others. Seeing the passion amongst everyone – both in our Trinity cohort, and in other cohorts across the globe that we had the privilege of meeting through virtual welcoming ceremonies – motivated me to push beyond the comfort of my personal space and ask questions. I actively sought out other scholar's work online and left comments, something which I would have been too shy to do beforehand.

Following Sinead English's advice after a Trinity leadership session on networking, I reached out to people via platforms like LinkedIn and the Laidlaw Network to build relationships and connections. Despite being confined to Zoom and the virtual space, we

shattered barriers and connected through banter, conversation, and genuine interest in and enthusiasm about each other's work. Having to adapt to online environments has meant that we have become more innovative and intentional in our interactions with others. I feel that as leaders, we have developed empathy and acceptance to a greater degree.

The social events organised by the Laidlaw team in Trinity allowed us to meet past scholars, some of whom have now become close friends, mentors, and project collaborators of mine. The format and frequency of these events and workshops has meant that we have regularly had the opportunity to share our research and approaches to various issues like real-world problem-solving. Having these opportunities has been a crucial part in making the programme work. I have had the chance to learn direct and transferable skills from other scholars, like the process behind publishing articles and journalism – a key element of communication with the wider public which is something I highly value in my own research.

The variety in research and backgrounds has brought together a wonderful melting pot of approaches to friendship, leadership, work, innovation, communication, and connection. This has fostered a judgement-free environment of acceptance that celebrates community and teamwork, all whilst championing individual merit and difference. However, these differences have not always been entirely easy to cope with in terms of personal confidence. I often found it very difficult to look to other scholars in the cohort who were working on STEM or survey-oriented research projects with set outcomes, conclusions and data. It seemed to me that I was dealing with something much more loose-ended and malleable. I reached out and spoke to Dr Murphy and other students in Arts & Humanities research, who all confirmed that this is something they had also encountered throughout their studies – I most certainly was not alone. Whilst this comparison was difficult and at times made me feel lonely, it forced me to re-evaluate why I value what I am doing and the importance and place of literature in research. Talking with people conducting STEM projects about why they

valued research also helped me to see what we often shared common goals, and I came away from the experience with a newfound appreciation for everyone's research and the interdisciplinary connections that could be found between projects.

### **Going Forward**

As we leave behind the first leg of the Laidlaw programme, I am looking forward to bringing all of the skills that I have worked hard to develop over Summer 1 and getting to further hone and apply them through the leadership in action project next summer. I want to use my confidence to continue pushing myself outside of my comfort zone and trying to reach even further ponds by connecting with new people and potentially collaborating on future projects. I would like to highlight the importance of interdisciplinary teamwork, forge new friendships, and continue to remind others and myself that life begins at the edge of the unknown.