

Reflective Report- Laidlaw Scholarship

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Research Project Experience

Entering my research, I had no idea where I would finish up at the end of the Summer. It's one thing to write a research proposal, to hypothetically plan your weeks, and to source your data, but it is something else entirely to put it into action. Feelings of intimidation were very much present, but mostly feelings of excitement.

Everything did not go exactly to my project plan- tasks, such as software installation that I pencilled in to take an hour, ended up taking multiple. But I think my plan didn't account for me letting the data and content lead me to where it was going. It wasn't like a course essay where I was looking to find a specific conclusion to get the grade I wanted. It was a free-flowing process, and as I absorbed myself in the literature of the time and read pages upon pages of data, I figured out where the project wanted me to take it- something I didn't realise would be the case when preparing.

My supervisor was a rock throughout the whole process. We met on the first day of my research weeks and discussed the project in great depth for over an hour. What I am so appreciative of is that I know he is extremely busy, as he was telling me of the three other research groups he was meeting that day, but he never made me feel like I was wasting his time. This is something he sustained for the whole summer- any time I had a question, issue, or wanted to talk something out, he was so obliging in making the time to do so.

When first discussing this potential research project back in November 2020, my supervisor mentioned a linguistic economist that he had met at a conference a few years prior who looked into the links between economics and language. He was fascinated by the Irish language and its development. They had been talking at said conference about potentially collaborating to do research in this area and my supervisor asked him to come on board the project. From then on, most of our scheduled meetings were attended by the three of us- each with something unique to bring to the table. It was a great feeling being in a meeting with two academics held in such high esteem and who had so much knowledge, and to have my voice heard. They were genuinely interested in the work, asked for my opinion and input, and offered invaluable advice. Not only that, but I very much felt treated as an equal- I think it was one of the first times I have been in discussion with adults and not to have felt as though I was too young. There were of course logistical issues- time differences, their demanding schedules, but both were always so accommodating throughout, and these technical mishaps were sorted.

I did find it difficult to manage the sheer amount of data I had- I had hundreds of figures of those who spoke Irish in 1851, 1871, 1881, 1891 as well as trade and shipping figures from the ports of Ireland and England throughout the century, and it was easy to feel overwhelmed. But after turning to literature critiquing the data available from the century and which sources were reliable and which were less historically accurate, as well as really honing in on my project brief, it became easier to decide what data to focus on to yield the most accurate results.

I had to learn how to operate two software with which I had no prior experience. Navigating the new interface and learning a new coding language proved very testing at times, but the pay off I received when I succeeded in creating comprehensive maps, animated scatterplots, and in-depth statistical analysis results was worth the effort. I was heavily relying on YouTube videos and community blogs to solve technical errors, which often put me behind schedule- a comma missing from reams of code can end up yielding no results, bringing me back to the beginning again. But these skills I have gained and the ease in which I can now navigate this software will prove invaluable to my academic career.

In terms of my style of leadership throughout the research process, I learned more than anticipated about my own leadership when engaging with my supervisors. Through the multiple meetings where my opinion and knowledge were asked (and taken into account), I found myself gaining more confidence in my abilities and in what I was saying. At the start, I would speak when spoken to and was afraid to question a point they were making. But, as my research, knowledge and skills grew, as did my confidence in leading the meetings, raising my concerns, and offering more perspectives. It's a good complaint to have, but my supervisors were very enthusiastic about my research, to the point that suggestions never stopped coming. I was happy to continue with my research beyond the six weeks, but I was afraid it would get to a point where there was no end. I was proud of myself when I spoke up and said that I would prefer to focus on certain aspects that I felt were achievable within the time frame and set their expectations to a reasonable, achievable level. I can have the tendency to always want to impress and over-achieve to prove my leadership skills, so to address the fact I wouldn't be able to fulfil all their recommendations was a big moment for me. I was even more surprised when they weren't fazed by this at all and agreed that these suggestions were more if we were to take this project further in the future. It avoided more stress on my behalf by having clear and open communication with my supervisors as I managed their expectations and my own.

I learned a lot about my personal resilience throughout the course of the research. I sometimes found it to be quite a lonely process and it required a lot of self-motivation. Unlike some of my fellow Laidlaw colleagues, I did not have a lab to go into every day and sometimes it was hard to get up every morning to go into the library to carry out around seven hours of research on my own. It

was very challenging at times, but as I reached out to some of the other scholars doing a similar style of research to me, it felt less lonely when they noted the same difficulties in the motivation and the isolating nature of independent research. It was easy to be consumed by the research, but I found that by making plans with friends (or even with myself!) meant I had to log off every day at a reasonable time, making the whole process of the research more sustainable.

Leadership Attributes and Personal Development

My current perspective on what constitutes good leadership is that it's a process that must adapt according to who and what you're leading. The basics of all leadership remain the same- respect, assertiveness, empathy, loyalty- but the way in which these manifest themselves must adapt to the group and task at hand in order to be effective. I think I am now a more assertive leader. I am less afraid of my own voice and the credibility in my ideas, and I'm not as hesitant to make decisions without days of mulling them over. I am also more open; throughout the course of my ALS group meetings, their candidness when talking about the difficulties they were facing in the research inspired me to do the same and helped me realise that admitting vulnerabilities was not a sign of weakness. It increased my respect for them and allowed our relationship to grow more than it would have if we kept it all very surface level and never admitted to any difficulties or doubts in our research process. It is definitely something I will take on as a leader in establishing trust and openness.

The reason I joined the programme was to get the opportunity to conduct independent research in the first summer and improve my leadership skills in the second summer. I didn't expect how much my leadership skills would develop and be nurtured in just the first few months of the Programme. The effectiveness of active learning through the workshops was so beneficial, as well as all I learned from my Laidlaw colleagues, facilitators, supervisors in how they approach leadership.

It was the session on public speaking that really challenged me and pushed me the most. Firstly, having an 'in person' event for the first time in nearly eighteen months was very intimidating, and the nature of the workshop meant that we were all very much 'on show'. Throughout the course of the session, we were pushed to release our inhibitions through games that also improved our breathing, stances, and vocal projection. It was a bit terrifying to be acting in what sometimes felt like a foolish way around my fellow scholars, but I think all our self-consciousness began to dissipate more and more as we got increasingly immersed in the session. The session really challenged me to push my hesitancy aside and focus on the reason why we must be good public speakers- to send a message and to share information that will benefit those listening.

I found the talk on effective networking to be really insightful. I always found the concept a networking a bit too opportunistic and exploitative for my own liking. But when I learned more about how to network non-aggressively and to come from a place of interest and passion, it opened my eyes to the opportunities that it could unfold.

In terms of communicating, I am usually the person who brings optimism and enthusiasm to the group. Although it is a trait that I am proud of, I wanted to push myself over this Summer to not be afraid to have an opinion different to that of others in my group, or to provide constructive feedback. I had previously thought of these things as negative, as I was afraid it would come across as harsh or rude, but I am learning that being upfront is important and not agreeing with someone isn't an attack on them. It's trying to strike the balance with providing honesty and transparency whilst maintaining compassion and kindness, and it is something I hope to continue working on.

On top of enthusiasm, I think I always try to bring a sense of everyone being heard to the table. I am comfortable navigating and engaging with strong personalities, but I am aware some situations may leave others feeling unheard. I believe that listening is integral to good leadership, so in a group setting, I look out for those who maybe haven't contributed much, and try my best naturally ease them into the topic of conversation by getting the conversation to relate to something they know or are comfortable speaking about. I am aware and have learned that not everyone wants to talk, and you can't force inclusion on the unwilling; but I think creating the opportunity for someone to speak up is important for a leader to do, and its up to the person if they want to take it.

Linda Doyle's talk in the first leadership session really struck a chord with me and it's something I often reflect on. Her message of the importance of maintaining your sense of self reassured me in times of doubt throughout the process. Being surrounded by so many examples of successful leaders, I found myself wanting to change completely and adapt a leadership style that was wholly different to my usual demeanour. Her words are testament to her actions and have guided me through the tricky waters of wanting to improve, grow, and develop, while also staying true to my own base morals.

I have found the Laidlaw Scholars Network to be a wonderful interface to communicate with Laidlaw scholars across the globe. From gaining advice and comments on my own research from those in other universities, to reaching out to Scholars whose projects fascinated me- it has really widened my awareness and improved my networking skills. Within Trinity, I have found new friends amongst my cohort that have supported me in my own work as well as who have provided fresh perspectives on research and leadership overall.

In the second half of the Programme I want to continue developing all my skills, but my critical and creative thinking skills in particular. I am looking forward in Summer 2 to being put to the test to turn my ideas into actions and to adapt to any obstacles situations may bring. The environment which I'll be working in will be a lot more complex and demanding than the safe arms of the library, but I want to push myself to rise to the challenge to achieve meaningful results. Until then, I hope to continue to push myself, put my skills to use, and keep learning to get as much benefit as possible from this opportunity.