

Laidlaw Summer 1 Reflection

Introduction

As an absolute beginner to research, the process of data collection and analysis was difficult, to say the least. What this summer of research and leadership skills building taught me cannot be summarized by mere bullet points. Writing about about the obstacles I experienced along with the journey sting like freshly cut wounds; thinking the smallest wins celebrated each week my research progresses still leaves a smile a smile on my face. As an extremely brief attempt to summarize the lesson I learnt as a 2022 Laidlaw Scholar, I present 2 assumptions I anticipated entering into my summer 1 of the Laidlaw Scholars program, and what I've gained from this experience.

Assumption #1: Week One Is Always The Toughest

To say that this assumption holds a respectable amount of truth does not rigidly contend that week one of research, specifically, is the most difficult. Rather, it quite accurately speaks to the saying, "it's always the toughest to start". To vanquish this thought, I put in a decent amount of mental preparation, as well as tedious devising work, making sure my research software is able to be downloaded on my laptop and scheduling in "research time" into the most productive part of my day 2 or 3 weeks before week one even began. However, that did not stop my motivation from plummeting as I began my research being shocked by the significant number of news articles I had to filter and analyze. Seeing the number "5314" articles just in the 2011 category got me thinking: "how am I going to go through 10 years worth of articles? Preparation beforehand did not help at all". That set me off on a fearfully sour note. The views in the weeks ahead made climbing this mountain worth it, once I got used to the groove. Unfortunately, the week when I would begin analyzing the data I've spent days and nights collecting turned out to be even more difficult than beginning my research. Of course, the week where I looked at my calendar and realized I only had a couple of weeks left to finalize my findings and complete a research paper was far more was also gave me slight heart palpitations as I thought to myself, "I haven't done academic writing all summer. This paper must turn out awful". By the time, I realized each time I had to begin doing a new type of work, be it data analysis, which I had not the slightest bit of experience in or writing — something I gladly enjoy, there seems to be a learning curve for any task that plays a role the research process. Good news is, recognizing this tendency also gave me motivation in honing the diverse range of skills required for these

checkpoints. It is a confirmation that because it is exactly because there is a learning curve, that I am promised to come out of the Laidlaw Scholars program, not necessarily an expert, but an open-minded learner who possess both hard and soft skills vital to my future academic and professional career, to say the least. So week one was definitely tough, but so were week 4, 5 and 6. The beginning of each learning curve to a new skill will, indeed, be difficult. It is not to say the preparation I did beforehand failed to ease off this sense of challenge, but the most important thing is to realize that the fear that comes with learning new skills, is totally reasonable. It only matters whether one sets up effective measures to stay motivated throughout this process.

Assumption #2: I Am 98% Sure My Hypothesis Is Right

While passion is what primarily drives the researcher's curiosity, making visions come to fruition, the challenge is how we are able to balance such with the ability to approach our research topics unaffected by our personal biases. Going into my research project with this assumption made the initial process of data collection especially difficult, as I had already begun to recognize patterns in the information, I found that perhaps my hypothesis did not reflect reality. Not only did this realization urge me to modify my research question, it also made me question whether I wanted to continue with this project. To put these thoughts on paper would be admitting that I failed at being a completely unbiased researcher. However, it is also accepting that humans are inherently prone to our preconstructed biases based on what we've experienced in our lives, and who we are, essentially. In an email in the midst of my dilemma, my research advisor wrote, "proving your hypothesis wrong is 100% okay too". Letting this really sink in, I was encouraged to overcome this mental block and the stubbornness that would stop me from learning what I thought I already knew. Not only did the experience of having to prove my hypothesis wrong early on in my research project exposed me to a common struggle within research, it also opened my eyes to the importance of genuine open-mindedness in learning. In the age of social media, the internet's algorithm seems to be the primary driver of our sources of information, where thoughts further solidifies themselves in echo chambers if individuals only stay in their comfort zones regarding their consumption of ideas. Interestingly enough, this underlines a greater social issue that I find fascinating, and is actually relevant to my research project itself.

Lesson #Infinity: Reimagine, Play With The Cards You're Dealt

Especially for individuals with high expectations for themselves, a summer of intense learning and constant exposure to unfamiliar challenges, it is fair to say that burntout was absolutely unsurprising.

Reimagining When Research Gets Dry

When endless filtering and analysis of pages upon pages of words began to seem like an endless and bland journey, I accepted parts of doing research that may not always be exciting. I had to remind myself why I was doing what I was doing. Reflecting on this question would always get me back on track, as even tasks that seemed unstimulating were tiny steps that would eventually bring me to the place I, like many others want to be — to make the world a slightly better place for all. Practically, I scheduled my daily tasks according to my personal work habits. For instance, intense data analysis and refined writing in the morning, when my mind is clear, and more tedious but mindless work for later in the day, where I simultaneously listen to music while completing this type of work to make it more enjoyable.

Reimagining During the Unexpected

My research advisor, unfortunately, caught Covid, during the most critical week of analysis in my research project, creating a week of delay. However, instead of letting this unfortunately blip stall my progress, I shifted my focus on beginning to write the introduction and literature review of my research paper in order to effectively utilize the time and resources I was given. These are key resource management and adaptation skills that were slowly built up, walking through the unexpected. Thus, transforming these challenges into opportunities that inspire myself to set a new pace, to reset and recharge before the time of intense analysis approaches.

Reimagining Through Doubts

When my research software turned out to be incompatible with the computer I was using; when I realized there was a more efficient way of collecting and interpreting the data I spent 4 times the time it could've taken; when I found human errors in my research on week 5... It was so easy to doubt and completely disregard the work I've already accomplished after learning about it in a short amount of time. The ultimate lesson is for me to transform these doubts into what I call motivation when given the opportunity of challenge and transformation, which is exactly what I signed up for, coming into my first summer as a Laidlaw scholar.