

Leadership Development

Introduction

In T.S. Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*, he affirms that, "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time."¹ The introduction to this essay shall, fittingly, consist in a consideration of where I started at the commencement of my Laidlaw journey. Physically, I was living in a suburb of the French city of Caen, where I was teaching English in a state high school. Weeks prior, I had participated via Teams in a team-orientated and high-octane interview for the Laidlaw scheme. Waiting for a bus in front of the Caen city hall, under a grey, rain-threatening sky, I checked my St Andrews email inbox; thrown into excitation by the reception of an email from the Laidlaw team, I could not have been aware exactly how profoundly my life would be affected by the good news that therein came.

Mentally, I considered myself a leader already. I had never shied away from leadership roles; I had been a deputy head boy, a senior student, a Summer Team Enterprise Project group leader, and a class representative. However, I had never thought about *why* I had assumed these roles — the vitality of which is underlined by Simon Simek's *Start With Why* — nor reflected upon *how* I had carried out my leadership roles. It was precisely this *why* and this *how* which would come to occupy me during the first summer of the Laidlaw programme, through the diverse presentations and lectures we attended alongside researching.

Gains from the Overall Programme

To enumerate *all* examples of the progress I have made thanks to the Laidlaw programme would take up more space than this essay permits. Instead, therefore, I shall focus on two areas in which I have noticeably developed throughout the overall programme: research and communication.

1 – T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html> [accessed 8th August 2023], section V.

Given the intensity of research which characterised my first summer as a Laidlaw scholar, it would be amiss not to comment upon how greatly my capacities for information curation, retention, and communication have been ameliorated. I would claim always to have been aware that proper citation and references were critical in academic work, however it was principally during my summer of research that I comprehended why this was so. I came to recognise — as I scoured through books which were seemingly no longer available to the general public and postgraduate theses archived in the Internet's equivalent of a dusty library corner — that the current state of academic research, as advanced, rich, and textured as it is, has been rendered possible only by countless years spent indefatigably pursuing knowledge on the part of researchers who did so for reasons of passion and principle, rather than fame and fortune. Since this first summer I have seen a piece of my own work (an undergraduate philosophy essay) published in the *St Andrews Arts and Divinity Faculty Journal*; whilst this humble contribution barely compares to the tomes produced by professional academics, I hope it testifies to the respect I hold for their truth-seeking endeavours.

Communication is the second domain in which I have made progress, for which I give credit to my fellow Laidlaw cohort. I had the privilege of seeing and speaking with other Laidlaw scholars often over both summers. Purely because of this opportunity, I have learned immeasurably about subjects which are not my own. I have had my eyes opened to *Modified Newtonian Dynamics*, to the notion of *universal unifying theories of Physics*; I have been involved in conversations focussing on novel treatments for cancer and how scientists are developing them. In short, I have found myself on unknown intellectual terrain and subsequently in masterclasses of how to condense complex ideas into comprehensible ones. Whether I responded reciprocally, in summarising philosophical concepts that I had studied, or by other topics — current affairs, politics, history, linguistics — all parties to the conversation benefited, due to their politeness, articulation, tolerance, and openness, to an extent which I fear shall be hard to replicate at any future time in my life with such consistency.

Gains from Leadership Training

Gains attained through the leadership training have come at times with ease and at others with mental wrestling. I have been fascinated to read of the research done regarding leadership by those who have dedicated their lives to studying management, commerce, and teamwork. I do find leadership, in general, an intriguing phenomenon. A number of the live speakers we heard in St Andrews, and a handful of the leaders whom I have met on my Leadership in Action (LiA) project in the USA, have proved inspirational to me and my vision of leadership.

On this latter group, those leaders I have met in the USA, I wanted to write a brief aside. Their positive mentality and assiduousness have served as the real-life proofs of an idea I have been aware of and entertained for a while: William James' *Will to Believe*.² Essentially, James suggests that for an individual to attain a certain outcome, the individual must first believe that the outcome *will* be attained. This might seem illogical or, indeed, far-fetched to some — the notion that a human's belief in a fact is a prerequisite of that fact becoming true — but I have seen this theory manifest itself and, where it does, I propose that leadership can serve as one of its driving forces. In the context of team settings, the faith required seems to be two-fold. Firstly, each individual team member must believe that a given outcome will be attained; yet, secondly, each team member must *also* trust that their teammates share this belief and will act accordingly. Think of a football team and the mental intertwinement between players: the defender who launches the ball forward must trust that the winger will run for the ball, just as the winger must reciprocally trust that the defender will play the ball forward. The striker who makes a threatening run into the opposition box must trust that the winger shall look up and cross the ball into the box for him/her, just as much as the winger must trust that the striker will actually run into box. Underlying all the players' actions is at least a minimal shared belief that the team *will* score a goal. For if one had *no* faith in the team scoring a goal, why wouldn't one simply put the ball out of play and concede that the team would have to wait for the next, more fruitful, attack? In my opinion, it is the obligation of a leader to ensure that this faith is genuinely maintained by all members

2 – William James, 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Cambridge Library Collection - Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1-31 (pp. 24-25).

of the team, and to buttress it when it is flagging. During my time as a scholar with the Timothy Smith Network, I observed incessant positivity and encouragement acting as such a buttress of belief amongst students, particularly when they were traversing particularly pronounced difficulties.

Discussions had and concepts discovered have challenged my views on leadership, a topic on which my perspective can occasionally be cynical and one-dimensional. Importantly, I now understand better *why* my views are configured as such; the DiSC assessment we completed at the beginning of the programme designated me a fervent ‘DC’ personality, which albeit not conclusive, does correspond to my leadership style, which can be dominant and conscientious to an excessive degree. Such traits may naturally skew my expectations towards the extremely demanding and my means of evaluation towards the exclusively task-orientated, facilitating a negligence of teammates and their feelings. Equipped with this deeper awareness of my mental machinations, I am more capable of detaching myself from commonly felt negative emotions — typically hot-headedness and frustration — and anchoring myself instead in calmness, perspective, and gratitude.

Networking and International Experience

The example of Laidlaw networking that most quickly springs to mind concerns the academic connections it has fostered and the academic opportunities it has facilitated; recently, my Laidlaw research supervisor, Dr Gavin Bowd, agreed to supervise my final-year dissertation on the (in)famous French author Michel Houellebecq. In a similar vein, I was able to rekindle previous links by contentedly sharing the fruits of my Laidlaw labours with my former French teachers at Antrim Grammar school.

My networking within the Laidlaw framework extends much further than this, however. Through platforms such as the Laidlaw Scholars Network and LinkedIn, I have been able not only to connect with intelligent and innovative people living across the entirety of the UK and Ireland, but to keep myself up to date with their plans, projects, and various developmental victories.

It has dawned on me throughout my time as a Laidlaw scholar in the USA to what extent the time the programme has enabled me to spend here is a veritable gift. Having previously lived and worked in France, I had spent some getting to know a foreign country; my volunteering in Boston, Massachusetts has, as it were, shown me a third waypoint by which I can more accurately triangulate my lifestyle, my culture, and my values within the world. Such awareness, not only of self, but also of others, is vital in an ever-globalising world, and I cannot overstate how privileged I am to have had the chance to see the world for seven weeks through the lens of American newspapers, media, and people.

Future Benefits to being a Laidlaw Scholar

One future benefit shall undoubtedly be the bond I have formed with the scholars who have accompanied me along my Laidlaw journey, during my time in St Andrews and in the USA. Be it at conference, weekend leadership courses, or in our summer one Action Learning Sets, we have had to be open, constructive, and attentive with one another. Furthermore, in getting to know fellow scholars, in spending time with them, and in seeing the quality of the work that they are able to produce, I have over time come to identify exemplary traits, characteristics, and, indeed, people, from which I have much to learn and of which I have much to emulate.

The scholarship has already gone a long way to rendering me a greater asset, in any endeavour, than I was prior. Through refinement of my methods of research and communication, through sculpting a more open and sophisticated mind, and engendering a proper appreciation for the richness and nuance to be found in teamwork and leadership, the scholarship has equipped me with the mindset and tool kit necessary to excel and to succeed in future group-working environments. I shall seek to put this mindset and tool kit to good use in aiding, protecting, and bringing happiness to others such that the programme will indirectly benefit a far greater number of people than merely me.

How I Intend to Give Back to the Programme

I would be extremely enthusiastic to speak to Laidlaw cohorts in the future about my time on the programme and about what I will have done since becoming a Laidlaw scholar. In St Andrews we had this very opportunity when a former Laidlaw scholar, who had in the meantime moved on to Oxford University, returned to provide us with insight and discussion concerning ‘imposter syndrome’. What he said whilst presenting had an extra sort of gravitas given that he had previously borne the badge with which we were freshly adorned, and such is an effect I would like to recreate personally.

In a similar vein, I shall endeavour to continue contributing to and enlivening the Laidlaw Scholars Network in as many ways as possible, be this online by activity on the website itself, or in the professional world by upkeeping communications with and energetically promoting potential opportunities to Laidlaw scholars to come.

Conclusion

I have broached a wide range of topics and headings throughout this essay. To conclude, I would like to bring finally to the fore a most principal fact which I hope has remained discernible amongst the longer sections of text and observation. My abilities as a leader, researcher, and active member of civil society — the three of which are the necessary building blocks of tomorrow’s leaders — have each been ameliorated and refined in ways I could not have replicated by myself, and which few other worldly programmes could have either.

The Laidlaw Foundation’s motto at present is “Because education changes lives,” echoing beautifully a quote often attributed to Victor Hugo (albeit I cannot find a reliable source that verifies this attribution), “He who opens a school door, closes a prison.” The positive ramifications of education have, to a greater extent than almost any other social phenomenon, been concretely demonstrated; Laidlaw Scholars can certainly testify firsthand thereto. It is thus my ardent hope that the great works of the Laidlaw Scholars Programme and the Laidlaw Foundation as a whole may be extended today, tomorrow, and beyond, such

that learners of all backgrounds and ages shall flow in the deluge of development and advancement in which I am fortunate to have been carried.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

I extend my enduring thanks to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for their creation of and continued support for the Laidlaw Scholars programme, in which it has not only been a privilege and a joy to participate, but which has been an erstwhile and vitally important part of my life for the past two years. Were it not for the Laidlaw Scholars programme, I would be a man less knowledgeable, less self-aware, and less prepared for the world that awaits; the opportunity has been a gift that I will always cherish.

Bibliography

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