

Laidlaw Scholarship – Leadership Development Essay

Finn Smyth, Summer 2024

The Programme in Review

Around two years have passed since I was accepted to the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme, and I was challenged to think critically about approaches to ‘leadership’. Now, having completed my project and returned from my volunteer work abroad, I will graduate equipped with several, new, essential insights and beliefs. First, a perspective on the constellation of backgrounds and personalities which make up people, teams, hierarchies and leaders. Second, a new approach to the relationship between theory and practice – an understanding of their complimentary nature. Third, a strong sense of urgency to get on with good work, though couched in a realistic view of my abilities their limits.

For me, the Laidlaw Programme was a kind of laboratory to test different approaches to things which I will engage with for the rest of my life: perpetual loads of work, emotional strain, building new working relationships and collaborating with colleagues, constructing a set of principles to give me direction as I move forwards. Emerging from the other end, a handful of approaches have passed the acid test of rigorous study, training, and discussion with my fellow scholars. I believe this is the greatest opportunity the programme provides, and I will be forever grateful to have gone through it. In my research project a year ago, for instance, several of the things I studied have helped clarify what I would like to work on in the future. My work was directly linked with different concepts of leadership, moreover, and have led me to approach team working environments completely differently. My Leadership-in-Action project in many ways confirmed the ideas I developed during my research about the kinds of work I feel to be most valuable for me and in society. It also put these ideas about leadership and urgency into practice.

Variety and Difference: No Such Thing as ‘Great Men’ in History!

In one of our first leadership trainings for the programme we were encouraged to view leadership as a pliable concept. As an historian, you learn early on that typically ‘great’ leaders, from Alexander the Great to Clement Attlee, are invariably products of circumstance as much as individual brilliance. The complex systems of nurturing and support which give rise to successful, pathfinding people, are too easily overlooked when we search for role models. A more fruitful concept of leadership recognises this and points us in the direction of teams, networks, and patterns of communication between people working together. At Hospitalfield House where we were first prompted to think about leadership in this way, the theory came to life in the conversations and work between scholars.

At Hospitalfield our interactions with each other were not about one person taking control of situations, dictating decisions, or prioritising one approach. On the contrary, though in some situations an aspect of good leadership does require someone to ‘take the lead’ to provide a team with direction, decision-making processes are at their best when they are collective and participatory. To explain further, the 19th century poet Lord Byron who spent some time as a child at Hospitalfield House, is one example of a stereotypically great leader. An eclectic figure with his own uniquely broad cultural frame of reference, a genius intellect which produced beautiful reams of poetry, a crucial figure in the canon of English Literature. But Byron was constantly surrounded by confidantes and comrades and was in constant discourse with minds that critiqued and challenged him. In similar vein, Mary Shelley is lauded for her individual brilliance in writing *Frankenstein* at age nineteen, but was led to produce the novel in part by conversations with friends, among them Byron. Byron’s work as much as Shelley’s is the result of the social ecosystem of his life, interacting with the others around him.

In as deceptively simple a setting as a group discussion, for example, often the most productive outcomes are the result of neither a free-for-all of different inputs nor a carefully chaired point-by-point agenda, but of a democratic dialogue where leadership involves prompting others to engage and disclose. The theorist Jurgen Habermas described this as an ‘ideal speech situation’, where everyone is free to share, and feels comfortable assessing each other’s contributions, all with a view towards producing the most reasonable outcome. A crucial thing which the Laidlaw Programme taught me is that these circumstances exist all the time regardless of our awareness of them. A group discussion is either democratic or it is not, but when we realise the possibility of leadership which is interspersed and interactive, we are more likely to work towards ideal speech situations.

Jo Freeman wrote in her essay *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* that “there is no such thing as a structureless group”, arguing that, despite our efforts, hierarchies of communication and various social orders will always form between people. The virtue of formal systems of decision-making is that, while they may feel bureaucratic and inefficient, they guard against informal cliques and unconscious leadership habits. A key take-away from my research project was that democracy is not supposed to be efficient. A healthy democratic system ensures that power is distributed, and democratically minded leaders prioritise the power of others before themselves. In truth, a consequence of participation is often conflict – those in favour of centralisation and more domineering hierarchies point to the single-mindedness of these kinds of systems – but this is not always a bad thing. In my experience as a Laidlaw scholar, respectful conflict and careful deliberation among colleagues, though time consuming, usually produces outcomes which are detailed, nuanced and agreeable to the majority.

Theory and Practice: Existential Thinking and Problems on the Ground

One of the greatest challenges of the Laidlaw Programme is learning how to cope with the slow-burn of obstacles. Focusing on one subject of study for six weeks, and then working with one organisation in a handful of capacities for the same amount of time, gradually generates fatigue. In my research, I went in hoping to solve a problem. Like the Dunning-Kruger effect where the more you know about an issue the less you feel you understand, the more I read about my problem the less sure I felt about a solution. This process threatens you with pessimism about your own abilities, and about larger solutions to social problems. Likewise, working with Samos Volunteers for two months in Greece required patience. The more you worked to help people and the more people you helped, sometimes the less sure I felt about the broader impact of the organisation.

Sticking through to the end of any challenging task will always be rewarding, but I feel that the truly valuable thing which these experiences provided me with is an understanding of how to navigate the emotions and thoughts which arise in the day-to-day of confronting problems. Sometimes how you actively manage difficult things matters more than how you try to overcome them. Some problems are perpetual, and some tasks are insurmountable for the individual, but this does not mean that we should not have to face them. During the programme, then, I learnt that the intersection between theory and practice is vital because of these different perceptions of problems.

The pessimism I encountered in my research was similar to a sense of despair I have battled with for years about systemic crises such as climate breakdown and mass migration. These are feelings which I believe many of my fellow scholars, and many of my generation, all share. After working on Samos, however, I have learnt the value of practical experience in tempering our theoretical understandings of existential issues. Before travelling to Samos, the only knowledge I had of the migration crisis was from the media and my own academic research. Most reliable projections of migration patterns this century predict an enormous movement of people due to climate breakdown. Struggling to grasp these complex issues in theory can quickly produce feelings of hopelessness, and my fear was that travelling to the front line of migration to Europe would only worsen this sensation.

Instead, I found that my time on Samos has left me with a powerful sense of optimism for the future. Witnessing a small group of people working tirelessly every day to help people in need in modest ways, despite the knowledge that their impact was marginal compared with the larger picture, helped me grasp how the *process* of confronting challenges is equally as important as surmounting them altogether. A world in which organisations like Samos Volunteers did not exist would be a world immeasurably worse off. Beyond simple quantifiable outcomes, such as how many articles of clothes were distributed each day (far from insubstantial in its own right), Samos Volunteers performs work, which is vital for many more, less empirically tangible reasons.

In the context of ‘Fortress Europe’ where various far-right populists are garnering support across the continent to go to war against people on the move; in the context of multiple EU nation states in contravention of international law, neglecting their obligations to provide for those seeking asylum; in the context of illegal ‘pushbacks’ where state officials are aggressively barring people access to Europe; Samos Volunteers is a beacon of kindness and hope. Showing people the dignity and respect that they deserve extends far beyond the basic services that the organisation provides each day, it is a way of embodying values and principles that can and should be enacted on a larger scale. It is a vital, daily process, the effects of which on the people who benefit from it reach far beyond.

Though what is ultimately needed to confront the migration crisis, as with all systemic crises, is a concerted response from those with the power and resources to address its root causes (often the same people historically and presently who are responsible for these same root issues), working with Samos Volunteers has granted me a more matter-of-fact understanding of what the problem actually looks like for those affected by it. At the smaller scale, the solutions are frequently straightforward – someone needs new clothes, or the camp where migrants are detained by the Greek government does not have good access to fresh water, or claims for asylum are not being processed fast enough because the lawyers are understaffed. It is not a leap of the imagination to think that the solutions on the larger scale are by their nature similar.

Conclusion: Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci wrote in his notebook when he was imprisoned by the fascists that “[my motto] is alive and to the point: pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” Because of his acute understanding of the problems gripping his society and his own life, Gramsci could not pretend that he was not living through a pessimistic moment in history. On the contrary, it is because of the severity and graveness of the problems we confront that optimism is demanded. Only if we are optimistic can we maintain the process of battling with work, and of contributing in small ways to the solutions needed to address larger issues. Working on Samos taught me that optimism is as much a *value* as it is a principle – it is an emotional state, an approach to life, the practical challenge to the pessimism we develop via theory.

We can’t expect to solve all our problems through sheer willpower, however. The labour demanded by my research project and my Leadership-in-Action project showed me this. While I now have a newfound sense of urgency to keep working towards good things, and to help others in small ways and large, I have also seen what the material limits of optimism look like. Burnout, exhaustion, emotional turmoil, constant stress – these are the consequences of an unchecked attempt to take on problems bigger than us as individuals. The contradiction is that *because* of the urgency of the problems we face, we must be kind to ourselves. You will always accomplish more with patience, by pacing yourself, than if you burn all your gas at once.

As I put the Laidlaw Programme behind me and get ready to graduate, I go forwards with the knowledge of these things. I hope that in the future I will be able to share my discoveries with future scholars of the programme, and participate again in those democratic discourses in which genuine leadership shines.

