

On leadership: A self reflection

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Almost two years ago I heard about the Laidlaw Scholars Programme from an undergraduate wide email from the university's career centre. It sounded to me at the time like a great opportunity, a suspicion later confirmed, but also something that would help me decide on a career path, a decision which, on the contrary, was only made harder by being part of the programme. I had the expectation that I would take part in two internship-like experiences over two summers, one in research and the other in a more abstract "leadership" role, which to me sounded like it would be a more managerial position, and that I would come out of it knowing for certain whether one or neither of them were my preferred way to work, effectively ruling out two career paths or, even better, finding the perfect one. Of course, my naive expectations were proven delusional very quickly, within the first hours of the first leadership event in hospital field I realized how nuanced, and more valuable than I could have ever expected, the scholarship would prove to be. I am now no closer to knowing what my professional ambitions really are, but I feel nonetheless very aware; more aware than ever. This is the story of that transformation.

One of the first things I realised with the leadership training was that I did not understand the concept of leadership. I do not remember where I first had this realisation, but I recall the feeling and my thoughts about it. The question "What is leadership?" was posed and I found myself at a loss for words. I had the feeling that I knew what it was, but when asked to explain myself I could not, a classroom case of not really understanding a concept. To this day I am not sure I fully understand it. As a kid leadership was to me the ability to give orders and have others do things for you, a very negative notion of the concept. As I grew older, I started appreciating the more positive connotations, such as being a good communicator and a team worker, but it always seemed like a buzzword with very little real meaning behind it. I believe this is due to the word Leadership trying to encompass many different ideas into one, including but not limited to project management, analysis and synthesis of ideas, organisation and guidance of people, social and self-awareness, and strong communication skills. I have learnt now that leadership skills are useful in virtually every role in a group, and being a leader does not mean getting people to do your bidding but rather guiding them in the direction that the group wants to go.

I believe the leadership training directly taught me some of these things, but it worked mostly indirectly by kickstarting many trains of thought that would, and still do, follow me on my day-to-day life, which is how the best of learnings happen; by integrating it with other aspects of one's life. The learning that came with the other facets of the Laidlaw Programme also happened mostly like that: yes, I did get to experience two amazing summer internships and learn a lot of physics, programming, project management, communication and even some script writing, but where the scholarship was most valuable to me was in the little ideas it planted in my head, that made me see the world ever so slightly different, and that promoted my growth. This is in my opinion what the programme really is about, not about leadership or

about research but about growth, both personal and within a community.

The subjective experience that I have grown between the beginning of the programme and now can be supported by phenomenological evidence and memories, which make me realize how much more confident, and capable and aware I feel now, when compared to two years ago. Of course, this is not all due to the Laidlaw Scholarship and its training, as I must take into account the natural increase in maturity that comes with aging, my personal and professional relationships with others and, at the centre of it, my university degree, but it would be a mistake to think that Laidlaw did not have an important part in it. Take, for example, networking.

Before joining the programme and for most of my life, I have had some degree or other of social anxiety. I struggled to make small talk and talk to strangers and that hindered to some extent a lot of social opportunities I had. Over the last couple of years however I have come to realise that talking to strangers greatly benefits from you knowing the purpose of the interaction. Take the Dublin Laidlaw conference I attended, for example. I met so many wonderful people, including someone that, through explaining their leadership project, gave me the contact details for who would become my own supervisor for the leadership in action project I completed at CERN. The interactions were made easier by me knowing their purpose, which was to share experiences with the Laidlaw project with people who had a common past, the programme, and somewhat similar interests, research and leadership. I have noticed everywhere that when I am not sure what the setting for an interaction is, I feel lost and struggle socially.

I guess in a broader sense the programme made me enjoy meeting new people more. I have mentioned the conference already, but this reflection would be incomplete without mentioning the rest of my Laidlaw cohort, who I had the pleasure of spending the first summer doing research alongside and, on the other hand, the summer students that were at CERN while I conducted my leadership project, some of whom became close friends of mine in record time. In the less personal side of things, the Laidlaw programme allowed me to visit two cities in countries I had never been, Dublin and Geneva, and explore the countryside of the Swiss French border. On a final note while comparing my now self to my past self, this journey has improved my self-esteem and I find myself doubting my own worth and abilities much less often, I am grateful for that.

Now, onto the future. We have seen who I was, naive, a bit uncertain about things, suffered from some self-doubt and anxiety when faced with unpredictable situations; and we have seen who I am now, still naive, more sure of things and myself, and more comfortable in a wider range of situations, with a lot more knowledge in research and project structuring, still unsure what to do now. What to do now. Undoubtedly, the Laidlaw training and soft skills I was able to absorb along the way will help me in

the future, the question is how. One of my first contacts with research was through a kids biography of Isac Newton and, after reading that book, still living in my home country, Brazil, I told my mother I would become an English scientist when I grew up. Through the work of destiny or more likely a mixture of pure coincidence and subconscious biases, I have ended up in the UK studying physics.

Will I become a fully-fledged English scientist? I am not sure, but it is one of the paths that seems the most open for me as I come to the end of my undergraduate degree. My initial desires of becoming a nondescript scientist have to face now the realities of academia. The popular image of ‘the scientist’ as a trope in media portrays someone that is well-versed in a plethora of different disciplines, often having a solid grasp of most scientific subjects as well as some engineering and manual prowess. The scientist is a person who applies their wide breath of knowledge to a wide range of situations and finds solutions to them; they are often polymaths. Or at least this was the idea I had in my head, and the level of specialisation present in real life research threw me off guard. This specialisation is the natural course of research, and I realise it aids in progress however I am scared it might not be for me, I both fear getting tired of one topic and wanting to do something more applied, where the effects on the world are less long term and more tangible.

So, my plans have been switching a bit towards possibly something more hands on, as well as more interdisciplinary. As much as my academic and professional interests lay on physics, philosophy and their intersection, my meta professional interests have evolved in the last couple of years to something more practical, I would like my job to change the world for the better. One thing I am certain of is that the skills I have learnt with Laidlaw will follow me and help me along the way no matter what that might be. The skills in research, written and oral communication, problem solving, analytical thinking, teamwork and self and project management will be useful in any job position, from academia to industry and to project coordination, but more than that, they will be useful in life. Over the last couple of years, I have developed an increasing interest in game design. I have enjoyed playing games since I can remember, with a focus on boardgames and I love understanding how a small set of rules can develop into something much more complex and almost organic, a bit like fundamental laws of physics. Anyway, in my journey learning about game design most, if not all, of the leadership skills I have learnt came in handy. Whenever I want to conduct a personal project or pursue an interest, they help me organize, focus and understand.

This is about all I have planned for the future, but there is one more aspect I feel the need to expand upon. As I said before, I believe one of the most important aspects of the Laidlaw Scholars Programme are the people. The Laidlaw team at Saint Andrews gave me organisation and technical support, my Laidlaw cohort gave me friendship and a sense of camaraderie, the scholars from other universities made

it feel like I was part of something bigger and, last but definitely not least, Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw foundation gave me the wider organisational and financial support to make this whole journey a reality. My gratitude goes to all these people.

Over the last months I have been a mentor for the Laidlaw Mentorship programme, working with pupils from some of the Laidlaw schools, and it has been very rewarding to feel like I am giving back some of the help and support that were offered me. I intend to go to the Leeds conference this year and try to help those who are not certain about their project the way I was helped in Dublin, leading me to the amazing leadership in action project I had this summer. I also intend to stay active in the network as an alumnus, connecting to people with similar interests to mine, in the hopes of also helping them find their own path.

Overall, the leadership training and my overall development through the programme has been literally life changing. I would not be where I am today if I had not taken part in it and for that I am very grateful. I expect I will continue developing and thinking about things I learnt now for the rest of my life: one's education really is the job of a lifetime.

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