

Laidlaw Research & Leadership Scholarship  
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# Reflective Essay on My Leadership Development

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## **Gratitude and Thanks**

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to Lord Laidlaw, the Laidlaw Foundation, and the St Andrews Laidlaw Team for their generosity and hard work for making these incredible learning opportunities possible through the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship.

I would also like to thank both of my supervisors, Dr Alice König and Daniela Garavito, who have guided and supported me in navigating the challenges of my research and leadership projects. It has been a privilege learning from kind and ambitious women who are experienced in fields I aspire to contribute to in the future.

Neither my research project in St Andrews nor my Leadership-in-Action experience in Colombia would have been possible without the organisations I have collaborated with and learnt from. Particularly, I am grateful to Quakers in Britain and The 50 Percent for their contributions to my research into peace education. And, I am thankful to make\_sense and Picacho con Futuro for their unlimited support and insights into local peacebuilding in Medellín.

Finally, the many people I have met and interacted with throughout my Laidlaw projects have had an immense impact on my learning and development as a researcher, leader, and human in this world. In particular, I would like to thank everyone I met in Colombia during my Leadership-in-Action project for their kindness and compassion in welcoming and accepting me as a foreigner in their culture and country.

## **My Leadership Development as a Laidlaw Scholar**

It is with nostalgia that I write this reflective essay about my journey as a Laidlaw Scholar, starting in March 2023. I began as a second-year student with the intention of researching peacebuilding in educational settings. Now, I am about to finish as a fourth-year student who has undertaken independent research and completed a leadership project about peace and education. I feel incredibly proud of my achievements, learnings, and personal growth within and alongside this programme.

I decided to apply to the Laidlaw Scholarship because it aims to develop a new generation of leaders through ethical training to tackle our current global challenges. It is, however, no secret that the application deadline in January collides with the seasonally most difficult time of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. Despite the lack of outer light and inner motivation, I applied with my research proposal *Young People's Experiences with Peace Education: From Inner to Outer Peace*. Ever since, life has been gifting me with many obstacles and opportunities.

The Laidlaw Scholarship has played a vital role in how my professional path has carved its way into the realm of peacebuilding. It has offered me different opportunities from presenting my research on young people's perspectives on peace to imerging myself into communal peacebuilding in Colombia. As a catalyst for my personal journey, the scholarship has enabled me to achieve all this and much more through leadership trainings and personalised learnings.

### **Leadership Trainings**

The first leadership training took place during our welcome and introduction weekend to the Laidlaw Scholarship at Hospitalsfield in March 2023. During the weekend, we received our DiSC profile to deepen our understanding of ourselves and enhance our skills for working with others. My profile was most distinct in "i" for influence. This resonated with me; I recognised my constant enthusiasm for new projects, but also my struggles with following through on all my commitments. Learning about my profile has increased my self-awareness, helping me communicate my strengths and weaknesses to the people I work with.

The second leadership training, I believe, took place during our first research summer as we received weekly lectures about research and leadership. While these sessions did not focus on our self-development as a leader, they organically introduced us to tools for leading research projects. Simultaneously, we met bi-weekly with peers to reflect on our individual research. This framework was useful because it provided us with inspirational take-aways and room for reflection and feedback from others. In hindsight, I clearly see how these different sessions strengthened my leadership skills of communication and collaboration with others.

The third leadership training was the Oxford Character Project, consisting of six workshops over six months about ethical leadership (November 2023 to May 2024). The workshops focused on developing tools for leading with; (1) purpose, (2) growth, (3) love, (4) integrity, (5) practical wisdom, and (6) a lifetime practice. These 6 months of comprehensive leadership workshops utilised theory and practice to help us implementing the learnings into our everyday lives. I learned that ethical leadership is not confined to my workspaces. Rather, ethical leadership is crucial to incorporate into all aspects of life. This view has been particularly insightful for me because, as the sessions began, I had an accident where I got a severe head injury and a prolonged concussion. Self-leadership and self-care became integral to my life, especially evident in my ongoing recovery process.

The fourth leadership training was a 2-day workshop in St Andrews. I could not participate because I was enrolled in a rehabilitation programme for people with brain traumas in Denmark. Though I finished the written tasks about leadership for the workshop days, the head injury strikes me as my most present teacher in leadership. Leadership is not always a deliberative conscious choice. It can also be a circumstantial necessity of asserting agency in difficult situations. My head injury forced me to execute personal leadership, to focus on completing my modules and recovering in time for my Leadership-in-Action project.

### **My Personalised Learnings**

When I applied to this scholarship, I was inspired by New Zealand's former prime minister Jacinda Ardern's way of leading with a commitment to love. Arguably, today as well as then, this is a foreign way of navigating politics, crises, and conflicts in our world. We live in a time where the most powerful people often perpetrate violence rather than promote love.

Therefore, I was interested in whether and how Ardern practiced love and peace at a personal level. These combined aspects made up my academic interest and provided context to one of my biggest personal learnings during my first summer of research.

During my research summer, I discovered Black Feminist literature, allowing me to expand my horizon beyond Ardern's leadership of love. I read all the available library books by Audre Lorde and bell hooks. Their collective voices took me on a deep dive into understanding the struggles for liberation while also pushing for loving practices. Reading hooks' *All About Love: New Visions* became my evening ritual, and guided me to take love seriously in my research. I found it difficult to do so because I feared the judgment of love being too feminine, soft, and irrelevant to my work. In countering such an internalised patriarchal mindset, hooks and Lorde became comforting companions for me. In further affirmation, I found through my research that young people largely articulated personal peace as sharing loving moments with family and friends. After all these discoveries, I started talking more openly about love, academically and personally, which was both a big revelation in and elevation of my life. And, essentially, the scholarship provided me the necessary support and opportunities to further explore this interconnection between love and peace in practice.

On June, 30th 2023, I went to Edinburgh to a conference called [\*Anytime, Anywhere Meditation\*](#). The conference was about the Buddhist approach to loving kindness and compassion and it focused on simple meditation practices. The other participants varied from academics from Oxford and Harvard to civil engineers at Google to Buddhist monks from Nepal. As I have had a (fluctuating) meditation practice since I became a yoga teacher in 2021, the discussed concepts were not necessarily new to me. However, I expanded my network and learned how love and peace could be practiced on an inner level to increase its presence in an outer context. I would not have been attentive to this aspect had it not been for this scholarship's generous research funding.

In August 2023, I was invited to speak about my Laidlaw Research in [\*The Resilient Researcher Podcast\*](#). This was an enriching experience that taught me to present my findings in an accessible manner to a wider audience. Equally, it strengthened my courage to follow my passions. It confirmed the fact that other people are indeed interested in concepts of love and peace in academia.

As my recent time has been marked by my recovery process, I have had to change my plans and prioritise my health. I was meant to go to Argentina for my self-defined Leadership-in-Action project of researching peace education together with The 50 Percent Global, an organisation I established contact with in my first research summer.

Before my accident, the approval process for this project was another avenue for learning. It taught me a lot about the necessary conciseness and preciseness of project proposals. The process was supportive because of my designated mentor, meaning that I could use all the available resources and learn intensively from constructive feedback.

After my accident, the administrative tasks were too excessive, and I had to put my project on hold. This, however, allowed me to discover the make\_sense project Reaction for Impact that intersected with my interests in love and peace. In July 2024, I went to Colombia to take part in a central project about Peace and Social Resilience.

## **My Leadership Journey in Colombia**

In Colombia, I worked with Oliver Righton (St Andrews) and Rachel Yue (Hong Kong) on a leadership project in the local organisation Picacho con Futuro. The project aimed to implement sustainability and circular economy initiatives through critical engagement with the children in the organisation. Over four weeks, we held six workshops, focusing on recycling plastic and water. It was an enriching experience where I learned how to develop and manage a project by executing leadership in action. In what follows, I will outline three of my most important learnings during my time in Colombia.

### **1. Team work is hard work**

In the make\_sense project, we worked together in a pre-fixed group with other scholars. As I had hoped to do my solo, self-defined project, I found it difficult at first to adapt to group work. Early on, we had to have direct conversations about our roles, responsibilities, and expectations in the project. I learned how vital it is for me to seriously address the equal distribution of work because I tend to “take over.” This is undesirable for all involved actors in the project, let alone myself. While I knew this weakness about myself, it was amplified with my team in Colombia. I had to become a better communicator, to check in with the others often, and to voice my concerns.

## **2. Listen to and learn from the community**

It might be a too obvious point to highlight it as an important learning. Yet, because we were meant to be *leaders*, we often felt that we had to bring everything to the table for our project, ranging from the necessary materials to the brilliant ideas. In prototyping our project, I however realised my misconception about leadership. You can only become a leader when you listen to and learn from your community. This became especially evident as we were working with children. We had to leave our egos outside the classroom and let ourselves be taught by them, a humbling but privileged part of leadership.

## **3. Rest, rejuvenate, and communicate**

The importance of rest was particularly present for me in Colombia because of my health circumstances. I have come to believe that rest is imperative to any sustainable project, making it a vital part of loving the leadership of such a project. Colombia showed me that by communicating my need for self-care to others, I allowed them to share their needs with me as well. Such sharing was fostered only through dialogue, allowing us to realise how we all need to rest and rejuvenate to continue our work as leaders in our projects and our lives.

## **Looking Ahead**

Today, in August 2024, I have just returned from my Leadership-in-Action project in Colombia. I am thankful to all the people I have met and for the life-changing experiences I have had. Looking back at these past two years, I see how being a part of the Laidlaw Scholarship has given me the opportunity to explore my interests outside the constraints of conventional academia. The scholarship has both enabled and empowered me to design my own unique learning experiences with objectives much greater than simply comprehending a new topic or writing an essay.

While my time as a Laidlaw Scholar is coming to an end, I trust that my leadership journey continues to progress in interesting ways. Together with The 50 Percent Global, I will participate as a young researcher and activist in a conference about the inner and outer transformations for peace in London in October 2024. Currently, I am also co-developing the *Young Person's Guide for Systems Thinking* with The 50 Percent, focusing on youth peacebuilding worldwide. Furthermore, I recently received funding to continue my self-defined

Leadership-in-Action project about implementing peace education in Argentina in the coming years. These next steps have become possible through my Laidlaw journey, which has given me a wider community and a clearer idea of what topics I want to pursue in my further studies and career.

In the future, I have many goals I want to achieve, both professionally and personally. Even though I do not know how or when to, I believe that having been a Laidlaw Scholar has taught me to become a more confident and conscious leader and a better communicator with my team. I have built invaluable professional connections in Argentina, Colombia, the UK, and Denmark. I also see the growing network of Laidlaw Scholars as a great source of support and inspiration for ideas and feedback. I therefore aspire to find my future path by building upon everything I have learned in the past two years within and alongside this programme..