

Reflection Summer 1: The Research Project

For my Laidlaw Research Project, I embarked on a journey to Poland at the beginning of July 2023 to find out whether and how Holocaust fiction influences the public memory of the Holocaust. While the actual journey to Poland only started this July, my Laidlaw journey had started nearly a year earlier. I started thinking about a project I wanted to apply to the Laidlaw Programme with at the end of the summer before my second year of college and developed an actual research proposal over the following months until the deadline was looming in February of this year. While back then actually getting this chance seemed very far away, I am glad I have made it to this point and cannot believe that the Summer 1 Research component is already coming to an end.

One of the first feelings I connect to this research summer is the joy of seeing this project which I developed over several months, come to life. However, I have to say that while I experienced this joy in multiple, frequent bursts every day, it did not stick with me all the time and was sometimes replaced by a certain amount of stress that was somewhat connected to slight feelings of imposter syndrome. This feeling was somewhat new for me and, therefore, I had to learn to deal with it throughout the course of the project which I mostly achieved by trying to ground myself by showing myself how much I had already achieved on my research journey and by having a realistic and well-organised plan for the remainder of the project.

During my Laidlaw interview, I was asked what I thought I could still gain from the programme when it comes to the Leadership aspect as I had taken on a few roles of responsibility before. Back then, and I still agree with this now, one of the main differences this time was that this was my personal project which I created and shaped in the way I liked and for whose creation and fulfilment I was fully responsible myself. It was my project, and no one had asked me to take on this role nor was I simply put in that role by others as it had been the case before, e.g., in school. While in both situations I have always tried to do my best, it made a difference in how comfortable I felt in taking on this role. Of course, there should always be some challenge to it which I am always up for, however, I enjoyed feeling comfortable or maybe rather confident in what I was doing while being responsible for my own project.

While these were my initial feelings, I would like to further reflect on my development by taking into account the eight Laidlaw core leadership attributes.

The second attribute “Self-Knowledge and Awareness” was quite a big one for me during this experience, especially the subpoint of being able to know one’s limitations and to act accordingly.

After having started the last two weeks of the experience, I encountered the feeling of not being motivated or even feeling fatigued in relation to the research topic. Whenever I did not feel motivated or like I was being productive, I was worried that procrastination was taking over. Some days I sat down and was not able to write down, analyse, or even read anything because my mind seemed to still be thinking about the environment itself or experiences of the past days. Procrastination has not really ever been a problem for me and was not a

Luke Pätzold
Trinity College Dublin Laidlaw Scholar 2023

problem for the first four weeks and over time I came to understand that it was the fact, that I was surrounded by the museum and, thereby the topic 24/7 while not being able to geographically and, thereby also mentally distance myself that was draining my mind. I had to learn not to feel guilty for this and had to accept that I needed to allow myself to take a break from not only the topic but also the environment which I did by going on day trips to Krakow or the surrounding areas exploring Polish and Jewish culture.

I was also able to develop the skill of being an effective communicator further. I found it quite difficult in specific situations at times, for several reasons. The specific cases I am referring to were those where the people my age, who were volunteering at the museum or living with me, had different moral and ethical understandings when it came to the museum as an environment to live in or the handling of the topic of the Holocaust itself. While I do not find it difficult to communicate when something is simply and obviously inappropriate, I find it hard to act in this regard when different approaches to the topic stem from a different cultural background and different upbringing or educational background concerning the Holocaust, making this point also strongly related to the skill of “Social and Cultural Intelligence and Awareness”. Having grown up in Germany, I think I experienced more education on the Holocaust than people from other countries would have been subjected to. I had to remind myself that not knowing a lot about the topic did not make the people “bad people” and that they were all there to learn. Still, sometimes I was surprised, even considering these different educational and cultural backgrounds, how little knowledge existed at times, however, this is one of the reasons why this project exists and needs to exist.

Being a critical and creative thinker. While this skill already came in handy and was further developed mainly during the process of developing and later adapting the questionnaire, as well as during its evaluation, I think that the main aspect that fostered this skill was the creation of the research poster. In relation to critical and creative thinking, this was a new challenge for me as I had never developed an academic poster before. What do I put on it? How do I break the information down? How do I present it in an adequate, aesthetic but also academic manner? I also had to come to terms with the fact that in the end, it will not ever be able to represent the nuance of my research.

My chances to further develop my “Collaboration and Team Working” skills were due to the nature of my project quite limited, however, I tried to apply them wherever possible which was mainly during the meetings of our Action Learning Set. I really enjoyed these meetings as they not only served as a way of catching up with members of the cohort but also helped to bring about collaboration with the others in order to find a suitable solution to the problem that was presented. With everyone coming from quite different backgrounds, not only project-wise, I think it was interesting to see in which direction everyone was thinking and what their approaches to different issues were as well as how discussion and collaboration fostered shared ideas.

The last two weeks of my research project were one of the first times I slightly started to doubt my resilience as, as described above, the topic and environment had, understandably, pulled me down a little bit and I was struggling with procrastination.

Luke Pätzold
Trinity College Dublin Laidlaw Scholar 2023

This is also connected to another feeling which was however strongly connected to the setting: the feeling of isolation throughout my research experience. As I had already mentioned in my blog entry: I think spending time at the Museum and Memorial Auschwitz-Birkenau always catapults you into some sort of parallel universe. While there is a positive part to it which is the fact that most people care about the same issues as you, the setting of the museum still leaves you somewhat isolated. While working in the library which is situated in one of the barracks of former Auschwitz I, I could hear the groups walking past every five minutes and physically many people were around. However, due to the headphones that people are wearing it still does not feel like others are around and all you get to see is several groups of around twenty people slowly making their way through the former camp, nearly completely silent apart from the sound of the shuffling of their feet. It was also this feeling of isolation paired with and possibly also created by the difficult history of the environment that made it quite hard for me to feel motivated and to be productive towards the end because it was occupying my mind subconsciously. Though I really only made this connection in hindsight. While for my project I was in touch with many of the visitors when asking them to participate (and while knowing it was not going to be easy to get them to participate which is also why I spread the questionnaire over various channels online) many people's quite rude reaction to being asked to participate, sometimes added to the feeling of isolation.

When it comes to the last point "Research and Project Management Skills" I think I was able to apply my already existing project management skills to make the running of the project as smooth as possible but would use my notebook more in the future.

Furthermore, I developed my research skills mainly by getting acquainted with new methods of research, e.g., survey tools.

I was very content to see some of my already-developed traits in action.

The Laidlaw Programme stresses the ethical aspect of leadership which was something I had not encountered before and which is something I am concerned about not only on a day-to-day basis but specifically also regarding my research project. With such a highly difficult topic that is so strongly related to our understanding of ethics today and due to the environment I found myself in, I tried to make every decision by considering it on an ethical basis and feel like I have succeeded when now looking back on my six weeks as well as the results I am putting out there.

While I am content with and in hindsight also proud of how it worked out there are a couple of things I would do differently to improve the process if I were to do this research project again.

If my questionnaire had been ready and approved by the time I got there which was initially my plan, I think three or four full weeks of asking visitors to participate while summarising results simultaneously would have been enough and I could have spent the other two or three weeks working in an environment in which I was more comfortable and, therefore, more productive. While I understand, that yes, this was part of the experience, I think for the general process and me personally, a shorter stay at the museum would have been advantageous.

Luke Pätzold
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Many of those, in German: *Baustellen* (construction sites), in the metaphorical sense, I encountered were very much connected to the difficulty of the specific topic and the environment in which I was conducting my research and its history.

While having dealt with the topic and these places before, the length of this experience and the loaded character of the questions and answers of the questionnaire came with some difficulties for me but I am glad to say that I have gotten better at recognising this and at coming up with ways to deal with these impressions. While at the time I took the breaks I needed but felt bad about taking them because, in the end, I was there to look into exactly these difficult topics, I am glad to say that I have recognised that these breaks are justified and necessary and not a reason to feel guilty or like one is procrastinating.

In summary, I can say that there are many more things to learn and improve on, and there will always be, yet I am very content with how I was already able to improve and apply my skills as explored in this reflection over the course of my Laidlaw journey.