

Laidlaw Impact Report – Alannah Maxwell

Introduction:

“Moving through...fear, finding out what connects us, revelling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community.” bell hooks, Teaching Community.

As hooks so beautifully puts it, the creation of community is rarely a process of pure spontaneity. Meaningful and impactful community requires of its members a directed effort, the commitment to open reciprocity, and a conscious moving through fear. At one time or another, each of these aspects of community creation came to the fore while I was in Lima working with Comunidad Perú. The following report details this journey of community formation and reformulation, highlighting the centrality of radical care and acceptance throughout.

A combination of reflective and informative writing, this piece will move from technical overviews of the project itself to more introspective examinations of concepts like leadership, positionality, and pedagogies of care. The narrative moves through fear toward community, much as I had to during this Leadership in Action experience.

Project Overview and Impact:

Working with a team of three other scholars, we were first introduced to the volunteers with Comunidad Perú at the start of our second week in Lima. As a relatively young non-profit, Comunidad work with two marginalised communities based in Lima; the Shipibo-Konibo community in Cantagallo and families living in Palo Alto. Comunidad’s primary focus is on the education of young people from the ages of 5-18. They run weekly numeracy and literacy classes, as well as physical and emotional wellbeing workshops. Breakfast and lunch is provided for participants through collaboration with the community soup kitchen.

For the six weeks we were in Lima we worked in Cantagallo with members of the Shipibo-Konibo community. Our original project brief identified the nutrition programme conducted through the community kitchen as an area in need of immediate attention. With over 60% of children in Cantagallo suffering from moderate to severe anaemia, our task was to work with the education programme volunteers to conduct a needs assessment of the kitchen with a view to introducing a more iron and mineral-rich menu. However, it was only upon our arrival that we realised the true scale of material deprivation in Cantagallo. Known for their intricate craft work and use of ayahuasca in ceremonial rituals, the community has been largely forgotten by the state with government bodies refusing to acknowledge and accommodate their cultural traditions and customs. The Shipibo-Konibo have been denied the legal rights to the land they live on for over twenty years, meaning that it has not been designated a residential area. The state thus has no imperative to provide clean water or sewage systems, nor to build permanent and safe homes for the 1,300 people living beside the Rimac River.

It was clear that in the face of such structural disadvantage we could not simply look for a quick fix. We were straight into the thick of things when onsite, serving breakfast and lunch to around forty children each day before conducting various activities such as drawing, spelling, English vocabulary, maths skills, and even a football match. We noted what foods and type of porridge the children

preferred, spoke to the regular volunteers about their eating habits outside of the Comunidad programme, and met with the team running the community kitchen to get a better idea of the entire cooking process.

Over the course of these initial inquiries and sessions, our team began to move forward with purpose. We brainstormed and identified three main areas of interest – combatting malnutrition, sourcing funding, and establishing a consistent income structure – and set about workshopping potential solutions. In the end, we pursued three different but interrelated strategies. We visited the local market, La Caquetá, and picked out cost-equivalent food substitutions for the kitchen menu, as well as sourcing new cooking equipment that increased the kitchen’s output. We also conducted research on funding and grant opportunities for Comunidad as an organisation, creating a funding directory that highlighted the key aspects of each grant offered. Finally, we organised meetings with a local business, facilitating a network between some of the women artisans in Cantagallo and tourists in Lima. The working plan is to eventually secure a permanent sales space in hotel lobbies, generating a reliable source of income for some of the women in the community. To launch the beginning of a partnership with the Selina Hostel in Miraflores we hosted a collaborative art market with Killa, an indigenous women-led social enterprise that sells organic and sustainable clothing. The artisans sold the equivalent of their typical monthly intake in one day, and we hope that as the partnership continues to develop more art markets will be held.

One aspect of the project yet to be touched upon were the challenges we faced as a group and as individual scholars. A frustrating element of our particular project, which in my opinion ties into the intrinsic nature of the Laidlaw programme itself, was simply the lack of time we had in Perú. The systemic and structural issues we were exposed to while away are not the kind that can be magically solved by short-term visitors. Despite the best efforts of our programme co-ordinators both in Lima and Dublin, I could not shake the feeling that our project was essentially us parachuting in for six weeks only to leave having taken more out of the experience than we had given. In terms of the more tangible outputs we produced, some felt more short-lived than others and largely dependent on the Laidlaw funding provided for the duration of our stay. Another issue was also the fact that few of us spoke Spanish to any level with which we could communicate effectively and authentically without needing someone to interpret. We went in with little knowledge of the local area, the language, and the people, something that I imagine strikes one as odd in the context of implementing positive social change.

I still feel that the best place to implement such change is where you are, but leaving the concerns outlined above aside for a moment, my leadership in action has really impressed upon me the mutual learning that flourishes by virtue of experiences such as these. Both parties, scholars and volunteers, were exposed to a set of people and modes of thought that they may have not been privy to before. The kind of care-focused relationships that this project has fostered across cultures and geographies are indispensable in this age of fractured politics. To have the conversations about what we can do to help each other through hard times and the building of meaningful communities do so much in and of themselves. To be reminded that there are so many people out there who not only care so deeply about those around them, but who are willing to dedicate so much time and effort to lifting each other up, is nothing short of revelatory. Far from disappearing in a disconnected world, these networks of solidarity and mutual aid continue to spread and I feel so privileged to be both witness to and member of the community we created this summer and beyond.

Lessons in Leadership and Future Goals:

Having become closely acquainted with my own working quirks over the course of my summer one research project, I was looking forward to carrying on the progress I had made this summer while in Lima. In the time since our self-directed research, I have felt much better equipped to handle change and to adapt plans as needed. Despite the lack of information we had received about the specifics of our project, I trusted myself enough to know that I would do my utmost to ensure our project had a positive impact on those we were working for and with.

In focusing on my newfound capacity to be flexible however, I overlooked a key difference between the leadership work done in summer one versus what we were to be doing in Lima: namely, that I would be working closely with people I didn't know in a completely alien setting. Combined with the pressure of deadlines and a keen sense of accountability regarding the project itself, I often found myself having difficulty balancing my understanding of our responsibilities to the community we worked with and my acting with empathy and care towards my teammates. A mixture of being naturally quite introverted, not yet feeling entirely familiar with Lima itself, and living so far from home meant that I coped by burying myself in the work we had to do. Until I recognised this pattern for what it was, I struggled to understand why some of the other scholars seemed not to be working in the same way. I had to come to terms with the fact that we all have different working and communication styles in order to foster a healthy and productive environment.

Recognising that we were all in Lima with the aim of giving the project our utmost, in the multitude of ways that such an utmost manifests itself, helped me feel much more connected to the majority of the group. We each had to find a way to bring our respective creativity and conscientiousness to the table, and in the end managed to find a routine that largely allowed our working styles to complement one another. Nevertheless, there were some other challenges that I regret not being able to overcome during my time in Lima. While we all came to recognise that we had different working styles, we struggled as a group to reconcile certain oppositional working styles. Part of going to Lima and committing to this project involved an implicit commitment to getting comfortable being somewhat out of your comfort zone. Adjustment would be difficult at times but always mutual. Unfortunately when this turned out to not be the case, we lacked the confidence to open a channel of honest communication and implement constructive feedback and check-in mechanisms. I believe we would have benefitted from an earlier conversation about what we expected from one another and what we perhaps owed to one another's time. Knowing that these measures may make such a difference will prompt me to utilise them more promptly in future.

Overall, both summers have allowed me to develop several distinct aspects of leadership. Summer one taught me about the importance of resilience, adaptability, and time management, while summer two shaped my communication and team skills. The one common thread between both summers can be found in my relationship to and with care. Learning to care for myself and others no matter the stakes has meant unravelling years of self-criticism and excessive competitiveness fostered by various learning environments. Untangling these habits meant moving through the fear named by hooks, and for one of the first times in my adult life I felt like I wasn't moving through that fear alone.

Conclusion

Taking our project as a whole and my own development as a student, leader, and friend, I am proud to say that I can look back on my Laidlaw experience with great feelings of joy and pride. Across both

summers I believe we cultivated and sustained multiple communities of shared values and common aims. My experiences of conducting research and participating in hands-on work focused on empowering communities has impressed upon me a real commitment to grassroots solidarity. We keep each other safe and look after one another because it is how we collectively reach forward toward better places and spaces. Moving with care and empathy creates meaningful community and thus meaningful change.

The Laidlaw experience has been at times challenging and uncomfortable. Growing and learning is not always easy, but the Laidlaw programme has combined with other experiences to ultimately leave me a better person. I can only hope that all of those I have met along the way have received equal benefit from it.