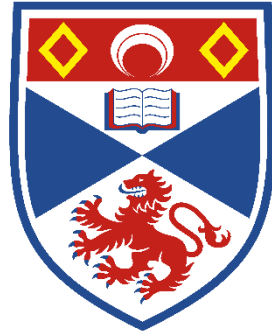


Lesson in Leadership

Reflections on my Laidlaw experience



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My journey to becoming a Laidlaw Scholar started with the boredom of a cold December evening, being grilled by my dad about my plans for the summer, and my future. It wasn't my favourite topic, but they were fair questions and as I drew a blank, I saw an email I had received from the School of Art History. They had sent a reminder about signing up for the pre-approved topics for the Laidlaw Scholarship, so I clicked through to the website, desperate to not make my summer break as empty as my winter. One of the topics was about a former St Andrews Rector who had bequeathed some of his art to the university. An opportunity to dive into the archives, spend hours surrounded by books in the library, in the endless sun of a Scottish summer, *and* I got to perhaps, potentially, maybe, go to Norway, this Fridtjof Nansen's home country on top of all that? Sign me up! So, I did. Well, after several drafts of a tentative email to Dr Shona Kallestrup, who would go on to be my summer one advisor, but who I already knew as one of the most engaging lecturers I had had in my sub-honours modules.

At this point, though, all that Dr Kallestrup knew was that I was emailing her perilously close to the deadline for this competitive scholarship that I had grasped to end the interrogation over the Christmas roast. On the other hand, Leadership Lesson 1: doing something by halves is better than not doing it at all. Which flies in the face of my previous philosophy: if I can't do it perfectly why bother starting it.

Climbing up four flights of stairs to Dr Kallestrup's office at the top of the School of Art History I felt sick to my stomach with nerves—I had contacted her so late, we had sent so many emails back and forth trying to smooth out this application that I had surely shown her that I was a hopeless writer, basically unqualified to work so closely with her. Especially because she was so eloquent, a great lecturer, and I was embarrassing myself massively so why should I even try? *Also*, this application has a leadership section? I am basically doomed to fail why bother and face rejection at all?

Four flights of stairs are enough to get you properly worked up. But Dr Kallestrup welcomed me with warmth, as she kindly took the time to explain the basic ideas and themes behind the project. She talked to me as if I was an equal and not the dunce I had convinced myself I had become in her eyes. We talked through the research and leadership aspects of the scholarship, what the interviews might consist of, and her own connection to Nansen (the flag he had placed in the union diner in her desk, liberated by her mother). It was Leadership Lessons 2 and 3: respect and kindness don't exist without the other. And: don't expect the

worst from people. She hadn't from me, so why had I assumed my most negative, pessimistic thoughts from her?

Of course, these are lessons I can apply in hindsight. Because the day of the interviews I hadn't slept at all the night before. The usual thoughts: I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this. In a rush of queasy adrenaline I grabbed tight to what Dr Kallestrup had told me, what the interviewers primed us with before, and told myself that they wouldn't just be accepting the most fully-formed leaders but that they wanted to admit those who were patently *not* leaders but were willing to do the awkward stuff of changing and growing and learning. Though, secretly, I still didn't believe this of myself. All I knew was that I wanted to spend a summer researching (and get paid for it no less!) and that I could worry about the leadership stuff another time. And it was all a moot point because the group task proved to me quite clearly that everyone else was far smarter and more personable than I was. Leadership Lesson 4: the more time you spend in your own head, beating yourself up about how everyone else has more likeable, interesting qualities than you do, the less time you get to spend enjoying meeting those people.

Unfortunately, all that time preparing myself for the worst meant I didn't really know what to do when I got the acceptance email. The pixellated confetti soaring across my screen made my heart drop a bit because now I had the opportunity to mess up Dr Kallestrup's research for her.

I made it to the introductory meeting, fumbled my way through social interactions, looked at the roadmap projected on the screen, seeing the mountains of research and leadership development ahead of me and was astounded, baffled, and frankly confused. There was no way I was going to be able to do all of that. Leadership Lesson 5: the things that *need* to happen usually get done, but usually much quicker if you accept that you need to do it.

I was completely vibrating with anxiety when the cohort was taken for a weekend in Hospitalfields. Arriving there in darkness and being assigned rooms in a castle lent a certain surrealness to the evening, I viewed everything as if at a right angle, like my mind had whirled through worst-case scenarios so fast my brain had disconnected from my body. But after being fed (mind-blowing, mouth-watering) food and having a rest, with the assurance of a schedule ahead of me that I could cling on to and being reminded once again that my cohort were all lovely people, I was faced on that first morning with the realisation that I had

perhaps been slightly overthinking all of this. Leadership Lesson 6: obsessively worrying about every single thing that could go wrong is *not* preparation—it's just a waste of time.

Even so, I faced summer one with many doubts. My first day involved going to the museum and being given access to the university collections, emailing the rare books department of the library, and trying to get in touch with the Nansen Institute in Norway. For the first time, I was more excited than nervous. Three weeks in I was in the middle of my research, talking with Dr Kallestrup every other week, chatting with my cohort on the beach, and flying to and from Norway, and the nerves had slowly but surely shrunk. Leadership Lesson 7: one way to lessen nerves is to just face the thing you're nervous about. And it turned out that by chatting to everyone else doing their Laidlaw research that we were all facing issues that summer. It was a relief to hear others negotiating the same imposter syndrome that I felt and helpful to listen to people talk about problems I wasn't dealing with. Both because (and I'm going to sound horrible here) there was something nice in knowing that there were some people who were having tougher times than me (my heart goes out to people who had to deal with experiments and coding, it sounded like they could be real headaches) and to come together and commiserate and have fun anyway.

I hadn't thought it possible, but I did in fact finish my essay and poster and even managed to submit them on time. When we next convened it was to discuss our LiA projects for the upcoming summer and even though I should have learnt lesson 5 by now, I was somehow convinced that it would never happen. Perhaps this is Leadership Lesson 8: growing and changing is not a linear process. Sometimes you progress in bounds, and sometimes you realise you're back to where you started. Although, to give myself credit here, I *had* changed. For one, I was simply excited to see all my cohort again, instead of hopelessly nervous. And another difference: I eventually settled on doing a centrally defined Leadership-in-Action project because the prospect of meeting and working with a group of people my age was exciting, instead of stomach-churning.

My summer in Mexico City has truly felt like the culmination of the lessons learned over my Laidlaw experience. I consciously let go of trying to make assumptions of what the other people would be like, and what they would think of me. Instead, I made efforts to connect with each person on the programme—whether chatting over a cup of tea in our co-living space, going grocery shopping, or attending salsa lessons in Parque Mexico.

I was more willing to step into leadership roles, even something as simple as volunteering to be the first to speak in group discussions, to the complexities of coordinating a group video that we created for make_sense. I was always so scared of messing up and looking like a fool; but even if I said something wrong in those discussions, or made the wrong decision with the video, I found that people respected me putting myself out there anyway. Leadership Lesson 9: if you're willing to make a prat of yourself, you often end up looking like less of a prat. I said often in phone calls home that this wasn't the type of thing I would have been able to do last summer, let alone at the very start of my Laidlaw journey. I will cherish my memories of Mexico City for the rest of my life, and when I reflect upon how my capabilities have shifted due to being a Laidlaw Scholar, I'm excited to continue participating in this wonderful community. Whether it's something as small as celebrating people in LinkedIn comments or providing advice for subsequent cohorts. I know that I'm aligned with the ethos of the Laidlaw Scholarship because every Laidlaw Scholar I've met signed up because they were passionate about something—whether their area of research or being an agent of change. Enthusiasm is a quality I hold in high regard; it is a characteristic I am proud of in myself, and it is one that immediately calls to mind the most rewarding parts of my Laidlaw journey.

It is strange to me to think of the person I would be now without the support and encouragement of the Laidlaw Programme. The careful structure has allowed me to explore both my strengths and weaknesses in a non-judgmental environment, getting me out of my own head and into the real world. This started with the DISC profiles, that gave us a general view of our leadership styles and also something to bond over as we prepared a group presentation on it. The great thing about Laidlaw is how it balances teaching conventional leadership skills—like public speaking—with celebrating diverse forms of leadership. The Oxford Character Project is an excellent example of this. Approaching leadership as a theory holistically rather than prescriptively translates to its practical application, Leadership Lesson 10: every leader is different and so is every team you lead.

I would love to end by saying that in terms of leadership lessons, the student has become the master. But if I've learnt anything from being a Laidlaw Scholar, it's that openness to learning is the best quality in a leader. Leadership Lesson 11: there's always more to learn, and more ways to grow.