

Leadership-in-Action Project Report

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Laidlaw Scholars 2024 Cohort, Summer 2025 LiA



Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation, my LiA project advisor Queenie Ngo and my partner NGO the Organization of Anonymous Contributors (OAC), and the University of Toronto Laidlaw Scholars Programme for their generous support, guidance, and encouragement throughout the development and completion of this project.

Note on photo: The photo included in this report were taken with the permission of Trường THCS Trần Hưng Đạo and its leadership. Consent was granted by the school administration for the use of these images in academic deliverables associated with the Laidlaw Scholars Programme.

Introduction

My Leadership-in-Action project took place in A Lưới, a rural mountainous district in Thừa Thiên Huế Province, Vietnam, where I partnered with Trường THCS Trần Hưng Đạo, a local middle school serving grades 6-8. The community is majority Kinh alongside Indigenous đồng bào students, and the school has approximately 50 teachers supporting 12 large classes. My project focused on bridging the digital divide in this underserved region by creating and delivering a six-week digital literacy and creativity curriculum.

I was responsible for the full lifecycle of the project - conceptualizing the initiative, securing funding for laptops through Silicon Valley-based Vietnamese donors, designing a curriculum, and teaching daily classes of 20-30 students. Each day, I spent about three hours teaching two consecutive classes. I also co-designed and delivered a teacher workshop series to transfer skills and ensure long-term sustainability, which drew more than 30 educators. Some travelled over 40 kilometres in the rain to attend. In addition to the digital literacy programming, I responded to student and teacher requests by running a short English conversational course, which focused on introducing interactive games (commonly played by schoolchildren in Canada).

The significance of the project lies not only in enhancing the school's digital infrastructure but also in equipping students and teachers with the skills to engage in an increasingly digital and AI-driven world. For students, this meant exposure to creative tools like Canva, ClipChamp, and AI image/music generators, which provided opportunities to experiment with self-expression and collaboration in ways they had not experienced prior. Moreover, this allowed them to get a first step into catching up with the students in more populous cities such as the capital of the region, Huế. For teachers, the workshops provided both professional development and a sustainable model to carry the curriculum of this program forward to future generations of students.

Through this report, I reflect on the project with three leadership themes. These lessons shaped the impact of the project and deepened my understanding of what it means to lead responsibly in a cross-cultural and resource-limited environment.

1. Collaboration (working closely with teachers, students, and community partners to co-create solutions)
2. Adaptability (navigating technical failures and unexpected constraints)
3. Cultural Humility (listening, observing, and respecting local norms and customs)

Challenges Faced

One of the most significant challenges I encountered was learning to navigate the unspoken social rules within the town and the organizational culture of a Vietnamese school. As the youngest person at the table, I quickly realized there were expectations I had not anticipated. For example, paying for meals or coffee without announcing it (asking to confirm with them prior), quietly cleaning the cutlery for everyone, and choosing honorifics that were considered respectful but not overly deferential. These norms were rarely explained directly so I had to watch carefully, make mistakes, and learn from the reactions of those around me. Similarly, generational differences shaped how my contributions were perceived. Habits I had developed in more collaborative, Western settings such as raising concerns or suggesting alternatives could be interpreted as overly assertive or unorthodox. Over time, I learned to recalibrate to listen first, adapt my tone, and prioritize the relationships that would sustain the project.

Additionally, although I am proficient in both the Northern and Southern Vietnamese dialect, the rural Huế dialect was unfamiliar, and many students spoke Indigenous *đồng bào* languages that I had no translation capacity for. This made it challenging to fully follow conversations with teachers and to communicate instructions clearly to students. Early on, I felt discouraged at lunches where I could barely follow the flow of conversation. But the experience provided an immersion environment that encouraged me to practice daily in and out of the classroom (at the markets, meals, to locals), and even letting students teach me slang and local terms, my comprehension grew from around 30% to nearly 70% over the course of the program.

Technical limitations were demanding, because when we first arrived, half of the computers in the lab did not function, and those that did often failed to connect to the internet. The local government's restrictions on Gmail accounts for individual students meant that many of the digital tools I had originally planned to use were inaccessible for students. The state's official computer science curriculum reinforced this gap as well because students were familiar only with typing and Microsoft Office, but had almost no exposure to searching the internet, using creative software, or engaging with AI. These barriers forced me to pivot the entire curriculum. Instead of direct hands-on application exercises for every student, I built lessons around digital literacy theory and responsible AI use, using demonstrations projected on an old TV. Later, I worked with teachers to identify a smaller group of students with pre-logged Gmail access, so at least some could pilot collaborative projects in Canva, ClipChamp, and AI music tools.

I can only reflect on possibilities regarding the underlying "why" of these challenges. These experiences showed me that the community lacked not only infrastructure but also equitable access to digital opportunity. The impact of this program, therefore, could not just be measured by how many students logged onto a computer, but by how much curiosity and confidence they developed in approaching technology. It was in reframing my expectations and working closely with teachers that I was able to keep the project moving forward even when field conditions were different from my original plans. I learned to try to let go of perfectionism and focus on the main purpose of why I was there - to equip students and teachers with knowledge and enthusiasm for these tools that could outlast my six weeks in A Lurói.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

Throughout this project, I relied on and strengthened a wide range of leadership skills, but the following are highlights:

Communication, teaching, and facilitation were leadership skills I applied everyday during the program. Explaining technology to students who had never used certain tools required some patience and creative problem solving. Because internet access and Gmail restrictions prevented students from practicing individually, I shifted toward demonstrations with after-class time for

students interested to try using the softwares. I also projected my screen to guide students step-by-step and we often did activities as a class (eg. let's make a song together!). I incorporated storytelling from my experiences in university, humour, and group activities like gameshows (which kids in Vietnam are quite used to watching) applying the knowledge to keep students engaged. Over time, I found myself communicating with greater confidence, even in a dialect that had initially felt out of reach.

Adaptability was perhaps the skill I practiced most often on a regular basis. Almost every day/week brought new challenges and micro-challenges, like computers that failed to turn on, blocked websites, scheduling changes, decisions from the principal to delegate the laptops to individual teachers or sudden shifts in student attendance. Rather than seeing these as failures, I learned to pivot quickly. In response to digital infrastructure limitations affecting the teaching and learning environment, I redesigned lessons to focus on theory and history around the possible uses and evolutions of digital creativity tools and responsible AI like basic machine learning, generative AI. When parents and students asked to learn English after the curriculum was complete during their summer break, I built a spontaneous short course using games and dialogue-based practice. These adjustments kept the program relevant and responsive to the needs of both students and teachers.

Cultural humility was an area of growth for me. At the beginning, I was discouraged by my limited understanding of the dialect and by the unfamiliar social norms that I often misstepped in. Over time with trial and error, I learned to lead less by asserting myself and more by listening and observing. The teachers became informal mentors helping to interpret local customs, and even in the classroom when I wouldn't understand a student's verbal contribution they'd go up to the board and write the sentence down for me to understand, sometimes even correcting my pronunciation with patience and laughter. It was a lesson in being patient with myself in learning when I saw teachers and students so empathetic towards my more limited language abilities. One moment that stood out to me was being invited to join teacher-only lunches and coffees before school. These moments reminded me that leadership is not about trying to impose one's style, but about meeting people where they are and valuing their perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

1. One ethical question I grappled with was whether it was responsible to introduce students to advanced AI tools when many of them had not yet mastered basic skills such as searching the internet or using email. While the teachers and students were eager to explore AI, I worried about creating a dependency on tools without prior context. To address this, I incorporated lessons on the limitations and risks of AI, really emphasizing the importance of responsible use and human judgment. For example, we ran activities comparing real and AI-generated images, discussing how to spot misinformation. This embedding of critical thinking alongside the technical exposure was to ensure students saw AI as a tool to augment/supplement but not replace their learning and creativity.
2. Because of policy and technical constraints, only a handful of students could directly use the laptops for the formal applications of the tools. This created structural limits of access, and I worried this created inequity within the classroom. My workaround was to make demonstrations public, offer optional after-class sessions, and co-develop a weekly computer access schedule with teachers to ensure computer science classes would have some exposure to these tools after my departure. While the constraints were at times frustrating, the process reminded me that a part of ethical leadership is being resourceful and prioritizing fairness even when the circumstances are less than ideal.

Collaboration, Team Dynamics & Conclusion

I worked most closely with the principal, vice principals, and the IT teacher, who served as both mentors and partners in adapting the curriculum to the school's needs. The teachers were candid about what they wanted in lessons and where adjustments were needed, and I found that they appreciated when I brought not just professionalism but also a sense of energy and fun to the classroom. I also collaborated with my NGO partner, the Organization of Anonymous Contributors, and their connections in Vietnam and California, whose donors provided the laptops that made this entire project possible and provided a Vietnam point of contact I could check in with throughout the project.

By the end of my Leadership-in-Action project, I came to trust myself more deeply, believing that I could navigate complexity, learn from setbacks, and still create positive impact in partnership with communities. These experiences taught me so many lessons that I intend to carry forward into my aspirations in law and graduate school. I learned that listening and observing is just as important as speaking when navigating new cultural contexts. It is also both normal and necessary to give myself breathing room to make mistakes and grow because leadership requires patience with oneself as much as with others. As well, identifying mentors in the community early on is incredibly useful and can provide needed guidance to navigate unfamiliar situations. If I had to distill the experience into a single message, it would be, “trust yourself, open up to the experience, and remember that you already have what you need to succeed”.