



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Record of Reflection

Felipe Sarmiento Gomez

Research Advisor: Dr. Scott J. MacIvor

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Week 1

My first week of research was quite overwhelming. I had done a reconnaissance visit about a month ago, so at least I was familiar with the setting. But suddenly, the research period had started. Immediately, I felt an impulse to do lots of things. I did not want to lose a second of my time. Funny enough, next morning my alarm did not go off, and I almost missed breakfast.

In this context, I learned my first and one of the main lessons of my experience: pacing myself, organizing my time and setting achievable goals. The first few days I ended the day exhausted, and yet I felt like I had not accomplished a single thing. This caused me a great amount of stress and I even got a bit unmotivated, feeling overwhelmed by the idea that I would not be able to complete my project. After some self-reflection and some conversations with loved ones and my supervisor, I realized I had to plan out goals to achieve per week and assign times for these goals, instead of trying to solve everything at once. However, I was still worried of getting burned out, since I had not finished my first week and I was already exhausted.

On Wednesday, I had been working all day, completely focused on the project, when my point of contact at the research centre invited me to a barbecue that they were going to do with the team. Of course, I accepted the invitation, but I was worried that I could not finish what I've been working on. Nonetheless, once I was there, I forgot all about that and had a great time. I was able to meet the people there and disconnect for a while. Next day, I was sort of renewed, and things went smoother. This taught me another valuable lesson: it is important to stop, rest and have time for things other than work, especially those that involve interacting with other people. We can never forget that before researchers, we are also people. This was crucial for me, since I was staying at the same place I was doing research. So, I had to be very mindful of not working more than what should be.

Week 2

With the lessons I had learned in just a week of research, I felt ready for everything. This was not the case, however. I had established with my supervisor that the first two weeks of the period would be dedicated to getting familiar with the system, what works and what does not, and so defining what the collection of data would look like in the following weeks. That meant that after this week, I had to start rolling, so I felt pressured by that.

Once again, I let stress get a hold of me. I realized that it was not only a matter of identifying the problem, but actively dealing with it. I had a sort of *déjà vu* because I was in the same situation as last week. Yet, I was able to get over it much easier.

Moreover, I learned about flexibility and adaptability. Everything I had planned and prepared for the field work was without stepping into the research centre once, without seeing a cacao tree in person. I came with some hard dates and ideas of what I should do. The reality is, planning and adapting to unforeseen situations are equally important. As I learned more things about the site, the crop, and even myself, I came to the before-mentioned conclusion. I had to let go of my need for everything to go according to the plan. At the end, there is only so much you can plan.

Week 3

The third week of the period kicked in, and I was a few days behind, but I was going to work in the weekend to compensate. I had discussed and written a data collection protocol with my supervisor, and I proudly started collecting data. My point of contact at the centre had been travelling for work last week, so upon arriving, he wanted to know how I was doing. I showed him my protocol and he gave me important feedback that strengthened the experimental design.

It meant that I would have to start again next week and thus not fulfill my initial week-by-week schedule, but I understood it was for the best. More importantly, I learned the importance of asking for feedback. If the researcher had not asked me for what I was doing, I would have lost a valuable opportunity of significantly improving my research. Feedback is an essential component of a research process

On the weekend, a friend visited with her family, and I was able to give them a tour of the site and explain them what I was doing. This was a key moment because I grasped how much I had learned about cacao in a few days. I also felt very grateful of the unique opportunity I was living, which was a dream I had had since childhood.

At the end of the week, I had my one-to-one meeting with the scholarship advisor. In it, I put into words all these feelings, which showed to me the value of self-reflecting, of taking a moment to look back. I saw all the challenges I had overcome, but intellectually and personally, and I felt strong. I knew with certainty that I would be able to finish my project. And I needed this strength for what was about to come.

Week 4 & 5

At the start of week four, I was sort of relieved, because the tryout phase was over. Onwards, it was just a matter of following the same routine the next three weeks. But it was harder than it sounded. It may not have been as intellectually challenging as the previous weeks. Nonetheless, since I had to follow the routine word-by-word for scientific accuracy, and it demanded a great amount of work, I had to have discipline and perseverance. Even if I was tired, I had to push myself to complete the tasks of the day at the required times. Good thing is, I learned before the importance of taking care of myself. Therefore, I planned out my week so that

I could completely disconnect from the research on the weekends, which gave me the much-needed rest to continue with the routine next week. After too many mosquito bites and quite a bit of sweat, I was rolling.

Week 6

When week six came, there was some unfinished business other than the usual data collection. We had to find a research group that had a permit for collecting insects because the research centre did not have one. Once we found that, more tasks came regarding the processing and storage of the insects. I still had to finish up the last week of data collection, and I would not be able to do that before going. When I started feeling stressed about this, I thought of what I had learned the past weeks. And I concluded that the best thing I could do was ask for help. In any research enterprise, you will need the support of others, so it is a good thing to know that we cannot do it all. I spoke to the people at the research centre, and we came up with a way to solve the issue. I was relieved, and I was reassured of the importance of accepting help.

After that, the fact that the research period was coming to an end kicked in, and I felt sad. I was already used to the chirping of the birds, eating with the workers at the farm, and playing with the dogs there. And I really enjoyed my work, being in the field, seeing animals I had never seen before, and learning each day more about cacao. I sat and viewed the beautiful agroforest, and I felt immense gratitude for what I had just lived.