



**PERSONAL
LEADERSHIP
JOURNEY
REPORT**

Holly Toombs

Introduction

My Leadership in Action project took place in Mexico City, working with the organisation ***make_sense americas***. Make_sense matched us Laidlaw Scholars with local NGOs working on issues related to climate change or gender violence, allowing us to use our skills to support them in the way they needed it most.



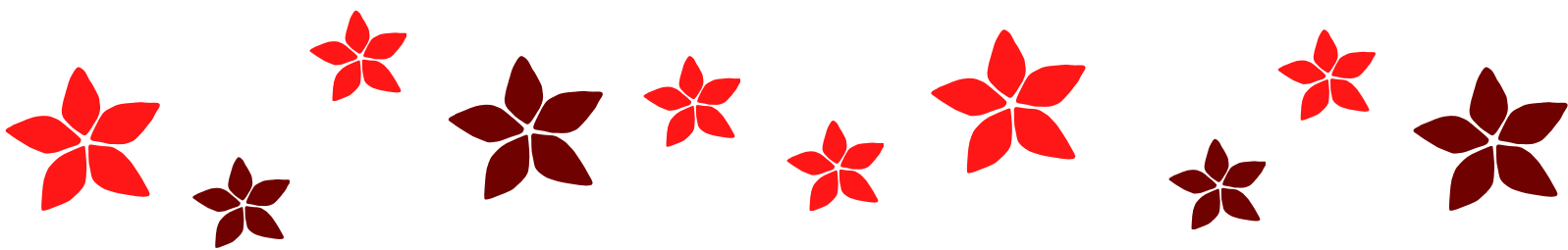
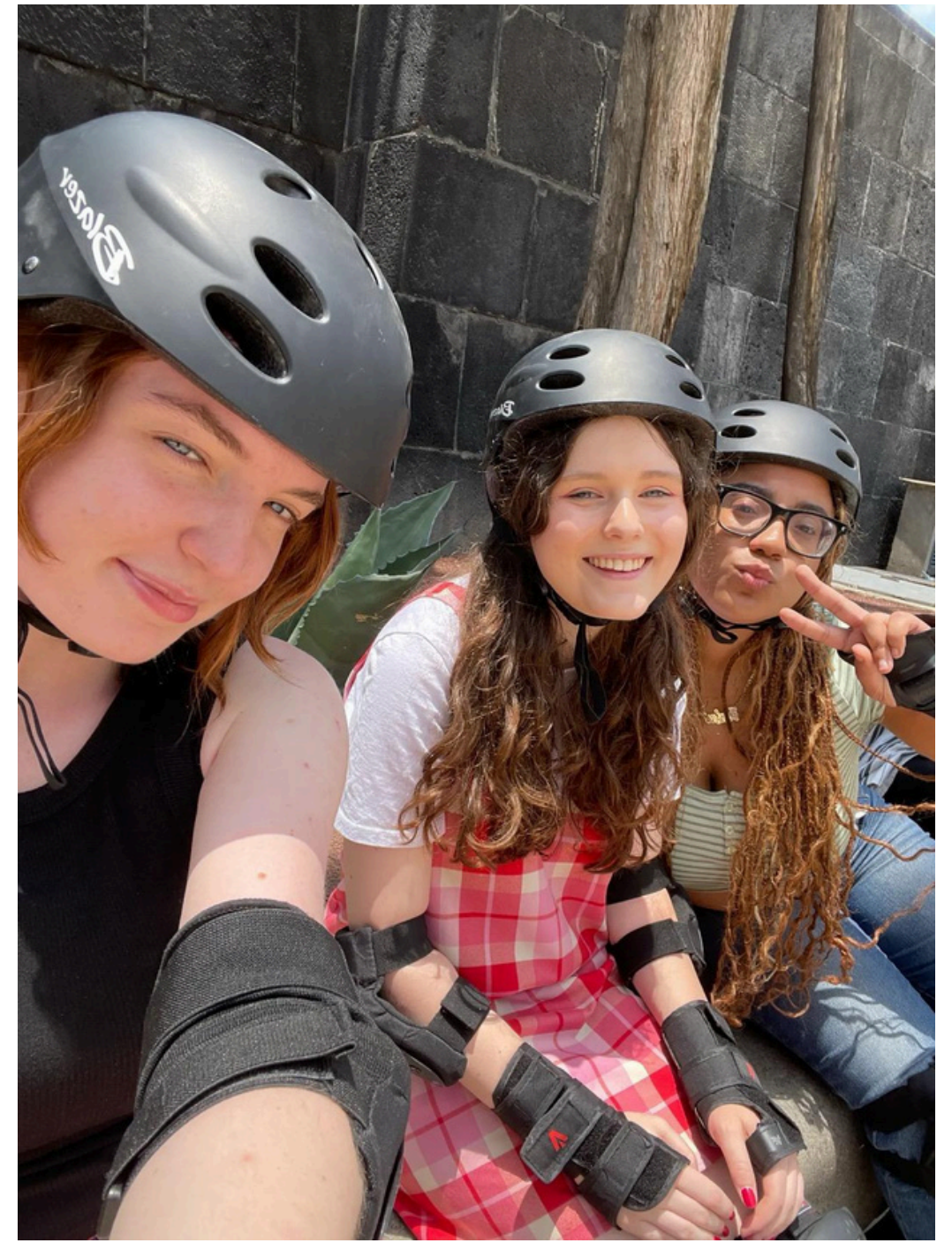
I worked with ***Las Sabinas***, an organisation based in the periphery of Mexico City, supporting survivors of gender-based violence with an annual programme called 'Floreciendo Sobre Ruedas', or 'Blooming on Wheels'. Those who have previously been supported by the organisation, volunteer the following year, to teach incoming survivors how to rollerskate, to reconnect with their body and form a community that promotes collaboration and healing.

My role in the organisation, along with two of my fellow Laidlaw Scholars, was to develop a social media campaign, to promote the Floreciendo Sobre Ruedas programme. We designed 5+ videos and 6+ infographics for them to share on their Instagram and TikTok pages, to educate their audience about the programme; the organisation's goals; and more generally about the issue of gender violence in Mexico.

The programme also offered the opportunity to drastically improve my leadership skills: both explicitly through leadership training and workshops, and implicitly through experience. I could list for hours the skills I learned through these six weeks, but in this report I will detail a few of the most significant: becoming a leader who is collaborative; who communicates clearly; who can balance delegation with inclusivity; who has cultural and contextual sensitivity; and who trusts in their own judgement when solving problems. I will demonstrate why each of these skills was crucial to leading this project, and some scenarios in which I was able to put them into practice.


Collaboration and Team Dynamics

My team consisted of 3 Laidlaw Scholars (myself, Maisy, and Jezlyn), 3 representatives from Las Sabinas, and 7 volunteers from Mexico City. Given my experience working in committees, and having worked collaboratively on my Laidlaw Research project last summer, I took on the role of facilitating communication between these different groups of people. From this, arose multiple challenges: the language barrier, effective communication of goals, delegation, and developing trust.



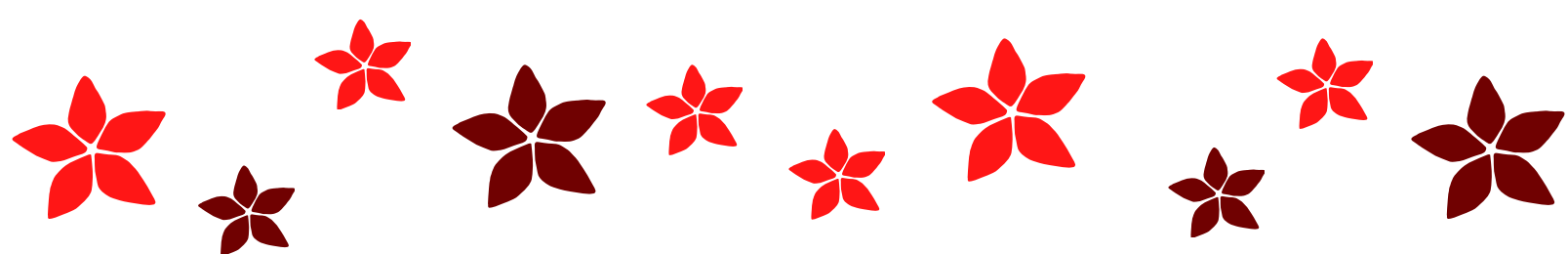
The language barrier was the most immediate challenge we faced, given that of the three Scholars, only Jezlyn spoke Spanish fluently. Our volunteers all spoke Spanish as a first language, and were learning English, so used this as an opportunity to practice, yet were more lacking in confidence than proficiency. The representatives of Las Sabinas also varied in English proficiency. For the most part, we managed without issue, utilising Jezlyn's bilingualism and a good deal of Google Translate, to communicate ideas and feedback. In some cases, the language diversity within the group turned out to be useful: we were creating content for Spanish audiences, so the volunteers were able to help us translate our content into Spanish, and record voiceovers that would sound much more professional than my broken Spanish (with a very British accent).

But even once we'd surpassed the language barrier, communicating our goals clearly was still a challenge. We ourselves were not entirely clear with our objectives for the 6 weeks, since we'd had practical issues with starting our project at the same time as other groups. Given our own uncertainty, it was difficult to communicate with the volunteers early on, and give them sufficient information to be able to help us. As a result of this, we decided to hold our first meeting with the volunteers later than initially planned, to give us time to clarify our goals for them, and to prepare resources (a presentation and Mural workspace) that would reduce confusion about what we expected of them. This was successful, and despite the lost time in doing this, I believe it was the right choice in enabling good communication with our volunteers.



Within the team of Scholars, we faced further challenges maintaining cohesion. My own style of working and leadership is hyper-organised: I love to use spreadsheets and documents to keep track of my tasks, and to keep everyone on the same page about our progress. I soon realised that others don't find this as useful as I do - other team members preferred to discuss tasks, and weren't used to having to regularly update or check a spreadsheet. In retrospect, this is something we should have clarified at the beginning of the programme, which would have saved us time and made collaboration easier. To address this issue, we changed our style of task delegation: rather than assigning specific, small tasks to each of us, we instead each took on a broader range of the project, and the responsibility of any task associated with that. For example, on the whole, Maisy took responsibility for designing the feminist puppet; Jezlyn did so for the infographics; and I did so for the videos.

This, on the whole, worked better, as it allowed us to each get on with our own aspects of the project without relying on others' tasks to be completed. We still maintained constant communication with each other as to how much progress our designated aspect of the project had made. Despite this, we continued to face issues on occasion when someone had a differing view of how the content should look overall. We should have maintained more of a consistent feedback loop between us, while still giving each other the trust and space to work on our own tasks independently.



Problem Solving

A key skill I had to develop early on was the ability to solve problems rapidly, effectively and creatively. One challenge we soon faced was that the representatives from Las Sabinas were shy, and uncomfortable having their faces shown in the videos we created. While we (the Scholars) could have featured in the videos ourselves, we felt that as two of us were white, British, and spoke limited Spanish, we may not be relatable enough to our target audience of Mexican women. The solution we developed was to create a feminist puppet, which could feature in the videos, with a Spanish-speaker recording a voiceover to complete the videos. The idea seemed to work really effectively: it solved the problems of shyness and cultural appropriateness; and resulted in a fun, personable brand that Las Sabinas have, and their audience will, come to love.

Stages of the puppet design process

First sketches for the puppet

Puppet on strings



Full body hand puppet



Finger puppet

Colour scheme:



Making the puppet, however, presented many more challenges that required rapidly solving. It was difficult to source all the materials we needed within the time frame, especially since we were unfamiliar with shopping for craft supplies in Mexico at all. There were multiple occasions on which the items we needed simply wouldn't arrive in time for our puppet to be completed, and we had to adapt, finding creative alternatives and ensuring they'd be just as effective as the ideal option. I've always been inclined to treat instructions, especially for craft projects, as law rather than a guide, and it makes me anxious to deviate from that, in case it ruins the whole project and wastes time and resources. However, this experience forced me to trust in my own judgement where I had to make sacrifices and compromises, and I'm happy to report that it all turned out for the best!



Myself, Famar and Maisy working at Las Sabinas

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the work we were doing with survivors of gender violence, we had a lot to consider with regards to ethical communication. It was important to ensure that we had the survivors' best interests at heart, and that we accurately represented them and their experiences in the content we created for social media. However, it was equally important that we didn't push them to share any information that would make them uncomfortable. In the end, we didn't speak to any survivors directly at all, but gathered second-hand reports from volunteers who had worked with them on the programme in the past, to learn how best to represent them in our content.

This taught me something significant about leadership itself: decisions can't be made as a leader from a purely logical and objective perspective. It's important for a leader to empathise with all the groups of people implicated by the research or project they're leading, to ensure everyone is being fairly represented, and that sensitive issues are dealt with respectfully and in context.



Cable cars in Iztapalapa

Cultural Humility

A related challenge I needed to address throughout the process was my own cultural humility and sensitivity. I'd never visited Mexico before, and had little knowledge of its history. The only preconception I was aware I held had resulted from many friends and family members warning me to stay extra vigilant while travelling in Mexico, since it's known as being a particularly dangerous and risky country.

I was pleased to discover that while, of course, many areas of Mexico do carry very high risk, Mexico City felt incredibly safe. I was reassured by the noticeable action taken by the council to improve the quality of life in the city: aspects of their infrastructure were much better than even what I'm used to in the UK, such as having sections of the metro designated for only women, children, and over 65s.

When we visited Iztapalapa (a municipality of Mexico City), we were warned that it was an area with particularly high crime rates, and a poor reputation socially. Yet in recent years, a public cable car transportation system has been implemented to increase safety of commutes around the city. We took a trip on the cable cars ourselves, and a woman travelling in our carriage told us about much she appreciated the system, given how dangerous and scary her daily commute to work had been previously, driving for an hour and a half through narrow streets with high levels of crime.

The council have also built 14 'utopias' in Iztapalapa, which are community centres aiming to educate families on their culture, environment, and local history. These utopias house various facilities such as Olympic-sized swimming pools; sanctuaries for endangered local species; spaces for workshops and classes; and educational areas to teach children about climate change, bodily autonomy, and consent.



Honey tasting with Genera Territorios

I was hugely inspired to see how successful these initiatives have been so far, especially given how rarely I see similar collective drive towards fixing issues in the UK, where a large proportion of the population seem to remain apathetic to the overwhelming number of social issues that need addressing. In contrast, people in Mexico seemed motivated and driven towards positive change, with many social initiatives arising, and frequent protests occurring to challenge the council's apathy to some current local and global issues. My perception of Mexico as a developing country, supposedly 'inferior' to the UK in many ways, was significantly challenged, and I now believe the UK has a lot to learn from Mexico too.



Practicing our final presentation



Introducing the other Scholars to Las Sabinas

Conclusion

This experience has not only brought me closer to becoming an effective leader, but has redefined what I believe an effective

leader to be. Coming into the Laidlaw experience, I had an inherently negative view of leaders who tried to take charge, or trusted their own intuitions above appreciating the contributions of others. My version of leadership was an equal exchange of ideas, with the goal of reaching a perfect compromise that everyone in the team agreed upon in unity. This experience has demonstrated to me that neither approach works in practice, and has enlightened me with a new approach that integrates the two much more elegantly.



Our volunteers helping each other

In some ways, I believe even more strongly that collaboration is crucial to leadership. Yet, my understanding of collaboration was almost ironically ignorant of the individual contributions each member of a team brings to the group. Everyone has a unique and valuable set of experiences and knowledge, and should be empowered to take the lead for areas they feel most confident in. Each member should be able to assess when it's appropriate to take the lead themselves, and when to listen to someone else who may have more informed judgements in the area.

This relies on a level of trust that I've missed in my own leadership: I either take control of as many tasks as possible so I know that they'll be completed at least to a sufficient standard; or sit back and allow others to take over, presuming their confidence correlates with more proficiency than I could offer. Yet I've begun to learn to both allow others and myself to have conviction and courage in our own competence, without fear of speaking up when I have insightful contributions, and without fear of deferring when others do too.

I now believe that collaborative leadership is a fluid process, of trust and competence shifting between members of a team. In future, I will put this into practice by not just encouraging others to maximally utilise their skillsets, but by trusting my own experience and instincts, allowing myself to step up with confidence to decisions I know I can make well. This experience has proven to me that even though my skills, knowledge, and working style may differ from others, this fact only makes my contributions all the more valuable.



Acknowledgements I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to everyone who has made this experience possible.

Nuri and I



Thank you to Nuria, Kenia, Brenda and the team at make_sense americas, for facilitating such a wonderful programme; making me feel so comfortable and welcomed; and bringing a fun, positive atmosphere to the team!

Keni and I



To Pam, Clau, and Famar from Las Sabinas, for being such an inspiration with the work they do, and for collaborating with us so positively throughout this programme.

To all our volunteers, particularly Ariadna, Cecy, Berenice, Lorena, and Maria, who helped us create content. We couldn't have done it without them!

To Maisy and Jezlyn, my fellow Scholars, for being incredible teammates, being so enjoyable to work with, and for putting up with my constant stress and anxieties...



Maisy, myself, and Jezlyn



Maisy, myself, Lillian and Stella

To the other Laidlaw Scholars on the programme: particularly Stella, Lillian, Farsin and Bella. Thank you for being so open to trying new things and exploring a new culture, and for balancing our hectic working life with fun trips and relaxing activities!

To Ruby-Anne, Map, Ashley and the team at the Oxford SDG Impact Lab, for coordinating and helping me book this trip. Thank you for being such wonderful people in charge of the Laidlaw programme at Oxford; and for staying in touch with positive and supportive comments throughout my time in Mexico.

Finally, thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation for funding and facilitating this whole two-year long scholarship. I couldn't be more grateful for this opportunity, and am incredibly excited to apply everything I've learnt to being a better leader and person throughout my studies and career as a result.



Lots of the scholars, Nuri, Keni and Sayuri at our farewell party



LAS SABINAS

