



Laidlaw Scholars Program

Leadership-in-Action Reflection

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The six weeks I spent on the Sanriku coast felt less like a tidy project and more like an argument with reality - one in which my assumptions lost more often than they won, and where that loss turned out to be the point. I arrived with lesson plans, datasets, and an image in my head of success: full classrooms, polished maps, and deliverables that fit neatly into a portfolio. What followed were blurry projectors, constrained ArcGIS licenses, printers that refused to cooperate, and, centrally, the humbling realization that impact in Otsuchi would not be measured by numbers but by attention.

Week three was the lowest point. I had designed activities that depended on analysis tools students could not access; the workshop collapsed into a confusing hoshposh of empty clicks and stalled screens. That evening, I wrote out a furious, self-reproachful journal entry - the kinds of lines that make you confront your entitlement. I was starting to believe that my LiA was a failure. I had judged the classroom by the rules of places I knew well: vocal participation, visible scale, polished outputs. Otsuchi taught me different rules.

The turning moment was small and unexpected: a basement lab at AORI where Professor Hayakawa-san took time after work to show one student how to separate land and sea-origin weeds and plants. The lab smelled of seaweed and wet wood; trays and sieves and drying newspapers made science feel tactile and slow. Watching that

concentrated interaction - a single student, patient guidance, real attention - reshaped my thinking. If the community in this part of Iwate measures value by how much attention an individual receives, then my metric was wrong. That moment allowed me to pivot not out of defeat but out of realization and clarity. The community invests in individuals, in their youth, in their future, and takes pride in that, not sleek numbers or quantifying bullets on resumes.

Pivoting was necessary and practical. I stopped treating the software as the heart of the class and began treating maps as prompts for students. I rewrote activities to be resilient: short, repeatable tasks that required fewer privileges; offline datasets, public maps and paper fallbacks; brief demonstrations followed by long discussions and constant check-ins. Yuki-san's translation was indispensable throughout - not a simple channel for words but a cultural reframing that turned my clipped instructions into invitations. When a layer wouldn't load, we moved to the whiteboard and asked simpler, more human questions: "If you had to pick an evacuation site, what would you look for?" Those conversations revealed local knowledge no dataset could capture: where sea turtles move, where houses used to stand, how a seawall reshaped a neighborhood.

What changed, quietly, was the tenor of leadership I practiced. I stopped trying to orchestrate and started trying to accompany. The most crucial phrase I heard for this pivot came from You Jia Lee: "Meet the students where they are at." Adaptability ceased to be a buzzword and became a daily practice of erasing parts of my plan and writing

new ones in the margins. Cultural humility moved from an abstract ideal to a method: listen first, reframe expectations, design for the people who are actually in the room. Conversations with You Jia and my coach helped me see that silence is not always absence and that local norms of participation are not failures to be corrected but forms of engagement to be respected.

The students' final presentations were the evidence of that shift, not because their maps were flawless - many were modest, constrained by software - but because the questions they posed were alive. The thought process that went behind them was alive. Their bright eyes as they were presenting were alive. The work surprised and humbled me: in five or six weeks students went from not knowing the software at all to framing substantive spatial questions and explaining their reasoning. The small notes and snacks they left behind felt like confirmations: curiosity had been seeded.

This experience reshaped how I think about my personal brand and the kind of leadership I want to cultivate. Thought leadership is not demonstrated only in polished outputs but in the capacity to reflect, to adapt, and to center ethical practices. I stopped treating the project as some kind of a trophy or a personal game field. I stopped my ego in its tracks and instead found student curiosity and genuine learning as a new motivator for what I was doing. So if I want my future professional identity to be credible, it must be rooted in humility, in a record of listening as much as doing, and in



pivoting when needed, prioritizing not superficial and abstract feelings fueled by own desires, but rather community needs and realities.

There are practical habits I will carry forward. Design with fallbacks. Prioritize short demonstrations that provoke questions rather than long lectures that demand attention. Build materials that teachers can use without me. And always ask different questions: not how many attended, but who learned something new; not how polished the deliverable is, but how a student's view of their place has changed. Those are quieter metrics, but in places still rebuilding after loss they are the ones that matter.

The maps I left behind are imperfect. The more important maps - the internal ones that trace where curiosity lives feel more lasting. That is the story I will tell when I talk about this project: not a catalogue of outputs, but a record of listening, pivoting, and the slow, stubborn work of cultivating curiosity in students.