



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research
Programme**
Record of Reflection

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Through my research summer, I enhanced my understanding of leadership as the capacity to navigate ambiguity, articulate shared goals, and pivot as necessary. I realized that both leadership and research are most powerful when they are dialectic, which I was conscious of during this research period.

1) Articulating shared goals

I began this research project with participant recruitment, which formed the basis of my qualitative interview study. I quickly realized that this could not be achieved with my willpower alone. Although I was born in Japan, I moved to Canada when I was relatively young, so I did not have many local connections to help me find suitable participants for my research. As such, I needed to create a support network with locals who could bring me closer to accomplishing my research project. To do this, I cold emailed Tokyo-based academics and professionals who could have better connections to the sample I was seeking, where I learnt the importance of having structured and clear communication with potential collaborators.

These connections were extremely fruitful for practical help on my research (participant recruitment), but also to polish the culturally sensitive aspects of my study. During introductory conversations with these new mentors, I also sought to clarify areas such as determining effective interview questions that could translate across both North American and Japanese norms, which they graciously advised me on.

Across recruitment and research development, I found that the most productive conversations happened when I was able to articulate my questions and requests precisely. While my initial meetings were less structured and effective, by the end of my networking period, I found a logical flow of ideas that was able to communicate my vision to complete strangers. In this way, I interpret effective leadership over my research project as the ability to identify and verbalize my objectives to others, for them to grasp how they might contribute their skills to accomplish the shared goal (successful completion of my project). Ultimately, I believe teamwork and support networks (in this case, obtaining support from local mentors for my project) are rooted in making collaboration as easy as possible, which was facilitated by clear communication.

2) Navigating ambiguity

After I recruited my participants and conducted my interviews, I transitioned into analyzing my findings. As I coded my transcripts and wrote my findings, I was initially frustrated because my research findings did not point to specific answers. Many participants were ambivalent about their relationships with AI companionship, which made it difficult for me to answer my research questions in a clear-cut way. After talking with my supervisor, he pointed out that in itself was a meaningful finding; the ambiguity that the participants felt indicated an unresolved tension in how they perceived their AI companions, which the paper did not need to conclude or resolve neatly.

While I initially assumed that good leadership over my research involved taking all measures to create a cohesive and logical report, I learnt that leadership can also take a facilitatory approach by enabling other voices to contribute to the discussion. I realized that I was imposing a fixed progression of ideas informed by my biases or expectations, instead of accurately depicting the phenomenon I found. After changing my

leadership style, I believe I was able to produce a paper consistent with the participant's experiences, and suggest directives that can serve to alleviate multiple aspects of the complex social and emotional struggles they described.

3) Pivoting as necessary

As I transitioned into the last few weeks of my research period, I became increasingly overwhelmed with the amount of data I had to analyze and include in my report. I had initially estimated 8 participants for my project, but ended up interviewing 18 individuals. This left me with 27 hours of interview data, which was significantly more than I had anticipated. Given the fast-paced and independently-directed nature of the Laidlaw program, I felt the necessity to change directions according to what I felt was feasible for me to accomplish in the allotted research period.

When I completed my first set of analyses, I had ~20 disparate themes that I had identified in my corpus, which I had planned to weave into a cohesive narrative during the month of August. However, by the second week of August, I realized that I had to pivot since the process was taking substantially longer than expected. Eventually, I narrowed the paper down to ~10 meaningful themes to accommodate for the time constraints and concision required to produce a focused research paper. This pivot was useful, as the narrowness made it more readable, coherent, and feasible.

In that moment, I realized that taking leadership over my research also meant pivoting directions as necessary, without being attached to a certain vision I had of the project. I strived to maintain constant dialogue with myself to determine if I was effectively working toward producing a good research paper, allowing me to critically evaluate and change my workflow before running out of time to pivot.

This summer was extremely fulfilling and eye-opening in starting my journey as a researcher. I enjoyed the process of connecting with different academics, participants, and understanding the content of my research on a deeper level. With the foundation I developed this year, I look forward to honing my research and leadership capacities as I transition into my LiA.