

Western University

Scholarship@Western

---

SASAH 4th Year Capstone and Other Projects:  
Publications

School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and  
Humanities (SASAH)

---

Spring 2020

## Horse Portraits Business Project and Anova CEL

Alex Busch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/sasahr4pub>



Part of the [Painting Commons](#)

---

# **Experiential Learning Final Report**

Alex Busch

SASAH CEL – Western University

Professor Mahon

September 7, 2019

## **Introduction**

I feel extremely lucky to have participated in experiential-learning projects as part of my degree because they allowed me to learn outside of a school environment and to make a contribution to my community. When I look back on my time at Western, these projects will stand out as some of the most interesting, demanding and rewarding. I have no doubt that these experiences will shape my career, my values, my sense of self, and my place in my community as I move forward.

I worked on two community engaged learning projects during my time in SASAH. For the first, I created a small art business through which I sold horse related paintings and commissions to the equestrian community. During this project, I took my first ever art lessons and improved my painting skills, but, more importantly, I learned the basics of entrepreneurship: writing a business plan, designing a budget, building a website, and advertising. I also designed a how-to manual for other entrepreneurs that shared my experiences and offered advice for the first steps of starting a small business.

While my first project taught me a lot of important practical skills that I foresee myself using in future workplaces, my second project helped me discover a new passion, and realize how I can make a difference to my community. I worked with an organization called Anova, which is the merger and rebranding of what used to be Sexual Assault Centre London and Women's Community House. During my volunteer internship, I was a part of the 'pet committee' and was lucky enough to play a role in making our Clarke Road shelter pet friendly. This is a huge leap towards making our shelter accessible to more women escaping domestic violence. It showed me how background work like policy creation, budgeting, research, planning, and editing plays an integral role in an organization, and how you do not necessarily need to be a front-line worker like a shelter staff member to make a difference in people's lives. Working with an amazing team allowed me to reflect on collaboration and my leadership style, and on how the soft skills that everyone talks about but are difficult to measure actually play out in the workplace.

The second part of my internship with Anova centered around public education, something about which I previously did not realize I was so passionate. I had an incredible mentor, Annalise Trudelle, who taught me about presentation style, handling difficult questions and uncomfortable topics with grace, and how rewarding it can be to see a new topic really resonate with an audience. I was given the opportunity to facilitate a number of workshops on topics like consent, sexual violence, healthy masculinity, and LBGTQ+ issues and ally-ship to audiences of varying ages, abilities and education levels. I came away from this project with increased confidence, better public speaking skills, and some awesome contacts in a great organization. I am planning to continue my work with Anova.

Overall, I believe these experiential learning projects enhanced my university experience by taking me out of the classroom and allowing me to learn more about who I am, what my skills are, and what my future goals may be. The rest of this report will explain my projects in greater detail, and reflect on their importance to my education, my community, and my future career goals.

## Overview – Painting Business

For my first project, I started a small art business. The idea, and the equestrian focus, came almost by accident – I had picked up my paintbrush for the first time in years to do a painting of a horse for my dad’s birthday gift. It turned out better than anticipated so I posted a photo on Facebook – a photo that received a surprising amount of attention from my equestrian friends. A few people asked if I would do a commission of their horse, and the project grew from there.

I focussed on the equestrian community because the reaction to my initial Facebook post demonstrated there was a demand for a product I could offer, and a clear market. From an artistic perspective, it is definitely constraining to limit the subject of your paintings to one animal, but from a business sense, it is easier to develop and market a more specific product. Throughout the project, I was aware of the need to maintain a balance between artistic integrity and commercialization, because, while I was using this opportunity to grow as an artist and wanted to create paintings that I was proud of, I was also using this opportunity to learn about business, and was focussed on financial modelling and profit margins.

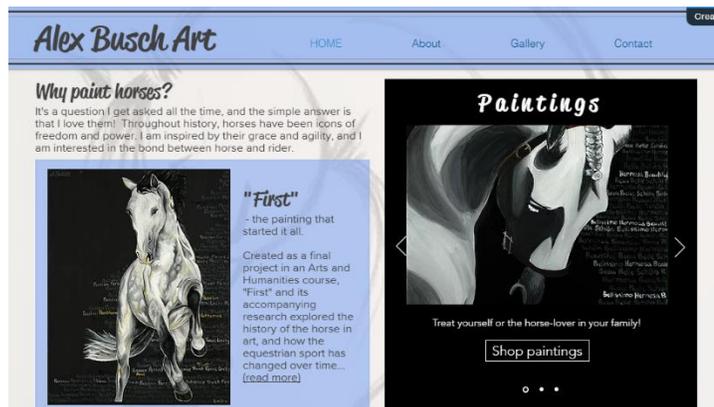


Figure 1 – Redesigned website homepage featuring two of my paintings

My revenue came from two main areas: paintings and prints that I sold at horse shows over the summer, and commissioned pieces I worked with clients to design. I developed the artistic side of my project by taking art lessons. I learned how to work in different mediums, improved my sketching skills and my eye for proportions, and learned many tips and techniques I could apply to my paintings. My teacher and I also discussed composition and commissions – how to go about working with a client to come up with a personalized piece and incorporate their ideas in a meaningful way.

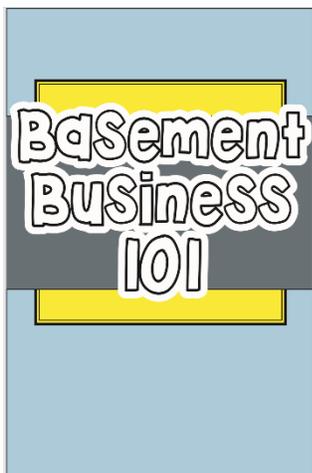


Figure 2 - "How-To" manual title

I developed the business side of my project by writing a business plan. I needed to understand profit margins, product quality, financial modelling, marketing strategy, and how to refine my target audience. I also built a website – and then completely redesigned it with advice from a web designer. At the end of the project, I created a ‘How-To’ manual for future entrepreneurs that discussed factors to consider when starting a small business.

This project gave me the opportunity to develop new skills, like web design, business planning and painting technique, and refine skills I already had, like communication, time management, and self-motivation. However, over the course of the project, I realized that my most valuable skill, the one that made this project successful, had

nothing to do with painting or business. It was the ability and desire to learn. I needed to teach myself – with help from various mentors – everything from how to mix colours and draw an accurate sketch to how to write a business plan and do financial modelling to determine how much to charge for a product. I never thought of “lifelong learning” as a skill before, but I realize now that it is a combination of soft skills like self-motivation, researching, goal-setting and time management that you pick up in school, and will be integral to success in our rapidly changing global economy. I will remind myself this next time I’m sitting in a lecture about quadric surfaces or Jacobean era poetry wondering when I’ll ever get to use this information in ‘the real world’. It is not the content I am learning that is important, but the process of understanding how I think and learn.

### **Overview – Anova Internship**

During my volunteer internship at Anova, I focussed on two main projects – the ‘Pet Committee’ and public education. Because the two projects were so different, I had the opportunity to do many different types of work, and gain insight into multiple parts of the organization. For the pet committee, I did a lot of research and planning. I read up on how other shelters became pet friendly and put together a proposal for ‘best practises’ that outlined which strategies might work best for Anova given our current set up. I planned a budget, drafted intake forms, attended committee meetings, edited documents, and helped develop policies for when the shelter is opened up to animals. It was a lot of background work and paperwork, but when the project was nearing its end, and the shelter was starting to get press coverage for its plans, I started to see how the work I was doing was making a real difference. Even though it wasn’t “front line” work, like volunteering in the shelter with residents, I was able to play a role in an important project that will greatly impact the lives of many women. Becoming pet friendly is a huge step forward in making our shelter more accessible to women escaping domestic violence because most women will delay leaving abusive relationships if they are worried the abuser will take their anger out on a pet that has to be left behind.

The public education part of my project involved facilitating presentations about consent, sexual violence, disclosure training, LGBTQ+ issues and ally-ship, healthy masculinity and gender roles. I was given the opportunity to speak to a number of different audiences, like Huron students and RA’s, youth groups, adults with disabilities (at Hutton House), the London Knights, Western fraternities, and staff at the Goodwill Career Center. This part of the project improved my confidence and public speaking skills, especially my ability to handle difficult questions and uncomfortable topics. It also involved a lot of reading and research to make sure I knew enough about the topic I was presenting on, and a bit of rhetoric, in anticipating where particular audiences might have trouble with certain



Figure 3 - Title page of one of my presentations

topics, and leading up to them carefully so as to make them the least difficult to swallow.

The public education part of my internship is where I really discovered my passion and felt like I was making an important contribution to my community. People often find topics like sex, discrimination and violence uncomfortable, and as such, don't spend enough time talking about and understanding them. Being able to walk into a room, normalize taboo topics, get people laughing, and provide a safe space for questions and discussion is very important to me. I think we tend to assume that just because people have sex means they know how to do it safely and respectfully; that just because people are in relationships means they can distinguish a healthy one from a toxic one; or that just because people are accepting of LGBTQ+ folk in their everyday lives means they know how to create truly inclusive workplace practises. However, in practise, that is not always true, and I am always surprised by how many questions I get about things that seem like they are (or should be) common knowledge. I believe that everyone deserves access to education, especially about topics that are so central to everyday life. I feel privileged to have participated in this work.

### **Transferrable Skills**

Despite being so different, my two projects actually had a lot in common in terms of the types of skills I needed to be successful. Probably the most important was my ability to understand how I learn because both projects required me to learn new skills and content quickly. Part of this is the ability to research: genuinely absorbing new facts, and then being able to apply that new knowledge to a task or project. The other part is the ability to learn new skills, like mixing paint or designing a budget. I make a distinction between learning content and learning skills because, at least in my experience, they are two very different processes. When I set out to learn new content, I usually read and make notes, but when I set out to learn new skills, I'd rather find a mentor. I am perfectly capable of reading articles on how to write a business plan, for example – and I did – but I find that having someone to answer questions and give advice along the way makes the process go so much faster, and gives me personal insight that I couldn't get from a book or a web article. In both projects I did a lot of reading and research, but I also had mentors I could bounce ideas off of and go to for help. The chance to meet and work with some incredible people was one of the best parts of both projects. You can learn so much from a conversation in a way that is so much more personal and engaging than reading an article. I am fascinated by how experience shapes perspective, and I find I learn as much from trying to understand why a person thinks the way they do, or why they are teaching me a certain way, as I do from the actual content.

Communication, both oral and written, is another skill that was integral to both projects. In my Anova project, communication skills were obviously central to public speaking, but they were also necessary in committee meetings and project planning. In my painting project, communication with clients was essential to planning a successful commission and starting conversations with potential customers at my booth at horse shows was an important part of making sales. From a writing perspective, my pet committee proposal needed to clearly and persuasively convey my ideas to Anova's senior leadership team, and my art business how to manual needed to be both informative and engaging for potential readers. Those two are the

obvious examples of written communication skills because they are larger projects, but communication is also so important in day to day tasks like emails, meetings, and organizing a project team.

Teamwork is a skill that goes hand in hand with communication because, with good communication, a team can be invaluable, but without it, a team can be counterproductive. During my Anova internship, I found I had great communication with both Annalise and Kelsey in public education. Presentations always went smoothly because we were very clear about what we expected and needed from each other before hand and would always meet quickly after to discuss what went well and what needed to be changed for next time. It was also important that we were concise – meetings and emails were always quick and focussed, something I found far more efficient and effective than the pet committee meetings that often dragged on without seeming to accomplish much. Part of that had to do with the size of the team: the pet committee grew to become unexpectedly large, and since it had started with only a handful of people, there wasn't an established hierarchy. The contrast between the two teams I was working with lead me to reflect on my own leadership style, and what I would do differently if I was in charge. It seems to me that smaller teams with designated leaders work best, and that a large project might be more efficiently managed by dividing tasks between smaller teams instead of tackling the whole project as a large group. The pet committee's struggle to establish effective communication was the most frustrating part of the team, while the public education team's strong ability to communicate was central to making our team so functional, showing just how important the skill really is.

Even more difficult, I found, was communication between Anova and the groups to which we were presenting. We were not always given a good idea of who the audience would be, or what specifically they wanted covered. Two specific presentations stand out in this regard: Hutton House and Goodwill. At Hutton House, we were told we would be presenting to an audience of adults with varying abilities, and were asked to speak about healthy relationships, but were not given any specifics. In terms of planning, a presentation for a group of physically disabled individuals looks very different from a presentation for a group of individuals with mental disabilities. Topics that may be relevant to one group may not be important to the other because they face very different challenges when it comes to relationships and consent. Delivery style and interactive components may also need to be different. The presentation ended up going quite well, but better communication between Anova and Hutton House would have made the planning process less frustrating and allowed us to be a bit more specific to the audience's needs rather than trying to prepare for every possible scenario.

While planning the presentation for Goodwill and emailing with my contact there, I faced the opposite problem: she seemed to know exactly what she wanted covered, and when I sent her the presentation so she could have it ready on the projector, she added a number of slides to my PowerPoint! I found this situation difficult to navigate because I didn't want to be rude, but I was surprised and frustrated that someone would ask a separate organization to come in to deliver a workshop, and then change the content of that workshop. I reached out to Kelsey at Anova for suggestions on how to respond, and, because the communication was so strange, she even

suggested I could cancel the presentation. I ended up deleting the revised slides and sending the presentation back to my contact at Goodwill, explaining that, while I appreciated her ideas, I had a plan for the workshop and her added slides did not work with my presentation style. Also, because I am speaking on behalf of an organization, I felt uncomfortable including some of the quotes she put in because I wasn't sure they aligned with our views or came from reputable sources. To compromise, I turned some of her ideas into a handout that could be given out at the workshop. This gave me the ability to rephrase her thoughts, include some of her suggestions that I didn't want to spend time talking about, and make sure she didn't think I was being dismissive or did not value her ideas. She ended up being lovely to work with in person, and after meeting her, I realized she was not trying to be pushy or micromanaging over email, she was just excited. That experience taught me how important communication can be, because it is so easy to get off on the wrong foot, and not always easy to get back on track. I had been very nervous for the presentation because of our initial communication over email, but the two workshops went very well, and she even said she would like to have me back to do more programming in the future.

Aside from the incredible experiences I had and the skills I developed, my biggest takeaways from my two projects were that I became more confident and valued my work more highly. At the beginning of my painting project, I felt uncomfortable charging for my art because I didn't feel like it was good enough, and I definitely undervalued the time and effort I spent working on it. I was also very nervous about starting up conversations with potential customers at horse shows and attracting people over to my booth. However, by the end of my Anova project, I valued my work highly enough to be assertive in presenting my content my way at Goodwill, and confident enough to walk into a room full of Western frat members, alone and without my slides (because they didn't communicate with the university well enough to have a working projector – see, communication is key!), and talk to them about sex. I've always been great at admitting what I don't know and recognizing my shortcomings and weaknesses. However, now I feel like I am better at recognizing what I do know, what I am good at, and how my skills are valuable.

These projects helped me grow as a person, a student, and a future employee. They gave me the opportunity to learn new skills, improve upon existing ones, work on projects that are important to me, and above all, learn about myself. They helped me discover passion for topics I didn't know I cared about, find what motivates me, and develop a sense of confidence and self-worth I didn't have before. By taking me out of a school environment and allowing me to design my own projects, these CELs gave me insight into how much I can accomplish in the future, if I put my mind to it.

### **Importance to Community**

My Anova internship allowed me to give back to my community in a way I haven't before. I am proud of my role in helping make the shelter pet friendly. It is a change that may not seem like a big deal, but one that could be the difference between a woman staying in an abusive home for years or having the support system to leave. My public education workshops gave me the chance to go out into my community, meet new people from all different walks of life, and help give

them the tools to navigate healthy relationships and sexuality. As I mentioned earlier, the importance of this type of education, especially to an adult audience, is sometimes overlooked because we think it's common knowledge. However, the workshops I ran showed me there *is* a need for sex, relationship and diversity education for people of all ages and abilities that is more inclusive, sex-positive and comprehensive than what currently exists.

My painting project wasn't as obviously community focussed, but it did allow me to engage more deeply with the equestrian community around London. Because of it I now donate artwork each year to SARI's charity auction (SARI is a therapeutic riding school) and to the London Dressage Association as a year end prize. I was also able to impact individual members of the community through my artwork. One specific customer stands out to me – actually, the first customer I ever had. She was walking by my booth at a horse show, saw one of my paintings and started tearing up because it looked so much like her horse that had just been put down. The painting was aptly named “Spectre”, and she ended up purchasing it to commemorate her partnership with the horse she had just lost. That moment reminded me that even though I don't really think of my art as “real art”, it can still have meaning and impact.

### **Importance to Education/Career Goals**

My CEL projects validated my perspective on education: study what you love and what you are passionate about, build your skills and learn how to market them, and work will come. When I first accepted my offer to Western, I was actually in the engineering program. Why? I'm a good problem solver and I got high marks in math and science, so I would probably make a decent engineer, but, more importantly – engineers get jobs. I was in the headspace of, “you might not enjoy it, but you can probably be good at it, so just get through school and then you know you'll have job security.” The best decision I ever made was my last-minute switch into Arts and Humanities, after an influential high-school English teacher convinced me I should be studying what I love. These projects proved to me that my education is valuable, even though its “just” English and Math, and not something like Medicine, Law or Engineering. These projects helped me realize how my skills are valuable and proved to me that there is an important place in the workforce with people of my skillset. They also gave me insight into how to market my skills for future jobs, because now I have a better understanding of how they play out in a workplace.

My projects also helped shape my perspective on my future career goals – not because I want to be an artist, or even necessarily run my own business or work at Anova specifically, but because through these projects, I proved to myself that it is possible to make a living doing what you love. I always knew that I am not the sort of person who could work for the weekends and get a job that is just a job. I want a job that is more than money – something I am passionate about, that I can dedicate my life to and come away with a sense of pride and accomplishment that I've really *done* something. While neither art nor horses is going to be that thing in my life, my painting project showed me that if you are passionate about something, and willing to work long, hard hours to make it happen, it is possible to design a career you love. It is possible to commercialize without corrupting, if you put enough thought into it, and it is possible to figure out how to pay yourself to do work you think is important and meaningful. My Anova project showed me how rewarding it can be to work in a field that positively impacts your community,

and that it is possible get support from community members by sharing your passion – if you're passionate, it's contagious, and you can rally the community around a cause you love to bring change to important issues.

Because of these projects, and other courses I've taken, my future education and career goals are starting to take shape. I will be graduating with a double major in SASAH and Mathematics and a minor in English Language and Literature. I am hoping the English and Arts components of the degree will demonstrate to future employers that I possess the important soft skills those subjects focus on, like communication, critical thinking, teamwork and empathy. I am hoping the math major proves I can learn difficult content and think analytically. I hope the balance between the arts and science shows that my education has been well rounded and keeps my options open for a variety of jobs in different settings.

Originally, I was planning not to pursue graduate studies immediately after this degree. I loved my internship with Anova so much I wanted to try to find a similar position and work for a year to gain experience. I also had no idea which subject I might want to pursue in grad school, or which types of degrees might help me be more qualified for a job like that. Now, I am thinking that my work with the shelter might be better as a part time passion rather than as a career, not because I am any less passionate about it, but because I keep discovering subjects, I want to be more involved in. I took a course in cryptography last year that lead me to switch my major to math (with some convincing from my professor). Because of that course, and some really interesting conversations with a friend who works for Digital Boundary Group, I have started teaching myself to code and am looking into pursuing a master's degree in math.

I have no idea where I am going to end up, but if I have learned anything from these projects and my undergrad as a whole, it is this: pursue the topics you can "nerd out" over, jump on opportunities when they come your way, and things will find a way of working out exactly how they're meant to.

## **Reflection on the Presentation Component**

Being given the chance to reconvene as a cohort and share our experiential learning projects was a very special experience. It reminded me that I am surrounded by a group of amazing, intelligent people who will change our world for the better. It also gave me the opportunity to reflect on the value of our humanities education. In a world that likes to focus on the importance of science and technology, it was nice to be reminded of the impacts our program is making in the social and humanitarian spheres of our society.

I found it somewhat challenging to sum up the contents of such a large project into a short presentation. It was a lesson in being concise and choosing the most important ideas to share. Summarizing ideas in a quick and engaging “elevator pitch” is definitely an important skill that will be valuable in any future career path. I also realized I need practise in being able to highlight my skillset and achievements in a way that doesn’t downplay them or make them seem unimportant. I know that for future job interviews and resumes I need to be able to articulate why my skillset is valuable and explain what I bring to the table that others might not. I think this presentation was good practise for that. Finally, I loved hearing what everyone else has been working on because, for the most part, I had no idea that they were doing any of this!