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Experiential Learning courses at The Walrus and JKUAT University

Betty Wang
Western University, jwan324@uwo.ca

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Experiential Learning Final Report Part I
The Walrus Foundation Internship 2017

My brief role at The Walrus will be documented as a Marketing and Events intern. Yet, the experience was much more than planning events, managing guest relationships, and reporting to my department head. In the six weeks at the organization, I learned the value of taking initiative, pushed myself to face the daunting but rewarding experience of trying the unknown, and reflected deeply upon my identity as a Chinese-Canadian. In this reflection, I will delve into the personal transformation I experienced during my internship.

Walking into the Walrus Foundation for the first time in mid-July, I did not know what to expect. In my first two months of summer, I balanced a full-time banking internship with basically a part-time career of obsessively reading every article posted on the Walrus website and imagining what the office will look like. Will it be an intimidating space with bleach white furniture or a cozy atmosphere with wooden shelves? Strolling past the long basement hallway and through the mouth-watering scent of the neighboring catering company, I finally arrived at the office and was greeted warmly by Blair. Blair was my buddy in the Events department and she gave me a quick tour around the office. The office was small and crowded but filled with creative energy and hearty laughs. A sense of excitement began to brew as I looked upon the illustrative and editorial designs with bold and intriguing headlines spread across every wall of the space.

Blair sat me down quickly after in the kitchen over a cup of coffee and emphasized many times that this would be learning experience created for me and I should take ownership of it by trying my hands at few new things. However, I was under the impression that "trying new things" pertained to marketing activities, an area that I was

quite comfortable delving into at the time. I realized then that there was a difference between learning new things and pushing myself outside my comfort zone. Learning new things looked something like this: *I have never created e-invitations for events guests. However, I am familiar enough with the professional language and tone of email communication that I could manage without much guidance or help.* I was doing something new but the learning curve was quite flat.

Meanwhile, pushing myself outside my comfort zone was a dramatically different experience. It looked something like this: *Blair asks me to read a Walrus article for the upcoming issue and create a three-sentence pitch to summarize and market the piece to radio hosts, TV stations, and online bloggers. Neither have I come from a writing background nor do I possess any witty vocabulary fit for three sentences of marketing gold. I am also at a loss of how to balance referencing previous pitch examples while making my pitch original.* I then proceeded to question my own intelligence and convolute my chest with feelings of dread and fear. An hour into the assignment, Blair walked into the room and asked me about my progress. I regrettably informed her that I am only about five words into the pitch and that I had many questions on how to go about writing one. She immediately pulled up a chair beside me and shared her approach, language choices, and tone in pitch-writing. As she wrapped up her extremely informative mini-lesson, I realized that I could have saved more than an hour if I just gathered up the courage to ask for her help from the beginning rather than using my time to question my intelligence and overthink my word choices.

It was at that moment that it hit me: I have always defined myself as a risk-taker but I may not have been completely honest with myself. I claimed to enjoy experiencing

news things and being able to grow from these experiences. Yet, if I were to truly examine the definition of *new*, I would find that there are two categories. First is defined as *new but familiar*, like sending out marketing emails. Second is defined as *new and foreign*, like writing a pitch. I have made myself to believe my ability to enjoy and excel at experiences of the first definition also translated to experiences of the latter definition. Nonetheless, the more I reflected on experiences I deemed unenjoyable, stressful, or uncomfortable, the more I find it to be of the latter *new* category. I have developed a subconscious aversion to these new but foreign opportunities as a result. If I were faced with an exciting task, the enthusiasm will be dulled by my overemphasis on my lack of experience. Oftentimes, I would choose to reject the opportunity thinking that I would never do it well enough anyways. This personal outlook has stunted me from embracing many experiences in life when all I needed to do to overcome this is to have the courage to say *yes* and the humility to ask for help when needed. The Walrus Foundation felt like a safe space for me to pilot and experiment my new outlook.

I have always wanted to learn Excel and data analytics. Being an Arts and Humanities student, those opportunities were quite limited and I was convinced that quantitative analysis was not my strength. Unsurprisingly, I did not expect to be presented with a data analytics opportunity as a Marketing and Events intern in a publishing company. Through grabbing coffees with different Walrus employees, I learned that the Philanthropy department is planning the *Canada 150 Donation Campaign* and could need a pair of hands to generate insights from raw donor data collected from the past three years. With the team lead on vacation, the department simply did not have the capacity

to do so. I, having never done anything of the sort, was extremely curious to see if I can analyze the large data set and ultimately offered to take on the role.

This time I wanted it to be different; I wanted to take on the new and foreign experience with courage and humility. When I was first given the data files, I was immediately overwhelmed not only by the sheer volume of data points but also the specific jargon used in the philanthropy department to identify and categorize the types of donations. I felt the urge to put off the work, to distract myself, or to work on something else I felt more comfortable with instead. When I had questions, I started automatically to question my intelligence rather than focus on the questions or seeking help. When my thoughts started to consume me in the moment, I got out of my chair and walked over to the Philanthropy department room. I sat right beside May, the Donations Officer, and began listing off my questions and describing my process. It was challenging and uncomfortable to admit that I created an approach to analyze the data but was unsure if it was the correct methodology. She reassured me, answered my questions, and pointed out a few areas I might be missing for my analysis. For the following two weeks, I taught myself various helpful Excel functions, created regular touchpoints with May, and produced a Donor Data Report that the Walrus Foundation has not previously had. This was an incredible growth journey for me to take a chance at things I was curious about, leverage the learning opportunities around me, and open myself up to new experiences, no matter which kind. After my internship ended, I continued to keep in touch with the Philanthropy Department and freelanced the data analytics work when needed.

Apart from the personal growth I had the privilege to experience, my time at the Walrus Foundation sparked many questions about my own Canadian identity. Being in

2017, the *Canada 150* theme permeated every aspect of the organization, from editorial headlines to office décor. The Walrus publications, known for its unique Canadian voice, naturally embraced the debate on what is truly Canadian and who is included or excluded in that narrative. I personally started asking myself: *Am I included or excluded in the Canadian narrative? What is the Canadian narrative or the Canadian Walrus perspective?*

I have always considered myself a Chinese-Canadian, a blend of both cultures but not truly an embodiment of one or the other. However, *is the blend of cultures what is truly Canadian and is the hyphen necessary or redundant when I say Chinese-Canadian*? There were moments at the Walrus when I felt like I did not belong to mainstream Canadian culture. I still recall when I was reading through the headline articles about CBC during my internship. In a piece, the author frequently referenced the Canadian household's attachment to Morning CBC News or the CBC Radio. I could not relate my Canadian identity to CBC's prominence in an average family's life. My family, equally Canadian, opted to listen to Vancouver's Chinese radio station because my parents could not understand English or French. In those moments, I felt like a stranger in my own home, silenced by my cultural upbringing and unable to take part in the mainstream Canadian discussion. I continued to get bursts of similar sentiments throughout my time at the Walrus, but I believe it has encouraged me to think more deeply about what the Canadian narrative is and my place within it. Even today, I do not have a concrete answer on what defines a Chinese-Canadian but I have become more comfortable with the concept that the Walrus gave a voice to not *all* Canadian perspectives but *a few* of it. Rather than fitting my story through one lens, I have come to realize that my personal narrative as a Canadian is equally valuable.

Overall, my internship experience at the Walrus Foundation was an invaluable one. Going in, I simply expected to learn more about marketing within a publishing foundation. To my surprise, my six weeks was much more than that. It was filled with genuine and supportive people who enriched my experience by enabling me to push myself out of my comfort zone and challenge myself to reconsider my narrative as a Canadian.

Experiential Learning Final Report Part II
Africa Service Learning 2018

In May 2018, I embarked on a six-week journey to Juja, Kenya as a lecturer teaching a Decision Making with Business course at the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT). Alongside with adapting to a new way of living, I had the opportunity to reflect on what my role is in development, what it means to make

an impact, and how to feel regarding the injustice I witness. As my mind spun in every direction, I decided to document my thoughts in a more organized manner using subheadings.

Thoughts on Acceptance

When I first landed In Kenya on May 2nd, I felt a strange sense of familiarity and comfort. Perhaps it was the humid weather that resembled my hometown or the fact that I spent 20 minutes in the same café when I last visited the country. Regardless, I felt this feeling will soon fade away as we drove away from Jomo Kenyatta Airport to JKUAT University, a completely foreign environment. Strangely, this sentiment never left.

This calmness spread over every aspect of my life in Kenya. When I first entered our unkempt new home and was forced to participate in a mini *human vs cockroach* warfare, I expected my response to be fear and disgust. When I saw the unpaved roads that sprawled around the city and buildings left half completed, I expected to feel waves of guilt and pity. When I heard of some JKUAT students who are two years overdue of their graduation due to inconsistent classes caused by lecturer strikes and government tensions, I expected deep frustrations and anger. Yet, through all these encounters, the strong emotional retaliation I naturally looked forward to never came. Instead, I reacted to every situation with simple acceptance and often responded with *mm, this is interesting* or *I'm not surprised*.

Not only was this an interesting observation, but also a foreign one to me. Therefore, I asked myself two questions. First, *what does the act of accepting mean to me*? I think when we learn about development initiatives from a textbook, in a classroom,

or through a voluntourism lens, it bars us from the complexity of a given situation. These methods tell stories, in which there is commonly *a context, problem, and proposed solution(s)*. The way of telling said story is linear, in which there is an obvious cause-and-effect relationship. Additionally, there is always a person/group or institution to blame for the conflicts. Therefore, as the recipient of this information, I fall victim to having an linear understanding of the African context. Even if I am aware of the complexity in given situations through academic literature and past visits, I unconsciously attempt to fit everything in an linear fashion to help me understand the situation. However, as I immersed myself at JKUAT campus and ignited conversations with students, I gained more insight into the tensions within an often dysfunctional and corrupt system. This restrained me from attempting to make sense of the situation in a linear fashion. The most relevant example was the ongoing nation-wide strike among public university professors for better compensation and elimination of government corruption. As a result, students had sporadic classes and often cannot graduate while the government continues to disregard negotiation efforts with the union. The deep-rooted *problem* here was hard to define because there is no single stakeholder to blame, but rather an amalgamation of parties acting in their own self-interests. This made a *proposed solution* even more complicated because no single party should implement a solution when it required a collaborative effort and compromise of varying self-interests. As I dived more into the complexities through conversations with locals, I stopped seeking for one party to blame. I realized there was no one party or one event that resulted in what is Kenya today. More so, there was no objective *villain* because anyone can argue for their self-interest. Therefore, as I speak of acceptance, it is the true realization that no linear stories can be

applied. As such, the anger, guilt, and blamefulness subdued as well. I think I've become more patient and forward-looking in my attitude towards development as I realized I am on my way to learning more about an intricate web of interconnected cause-and-effect relationships rather than just one. Therefore, every little part of the system needs to align to enable a functioning larger system and this could take a long time to achieve.

My second question then follows: *is acceptance still a response that provokes positive action*? I often speak about my interest in global development initiatives. Reflecting upon my past involvements, it seems that this passion was primarily driven by anger and frustration at the world. I was upset at the methods in which corporations operated exploitatively in developing regions. I was enraged when I discovered generations have lived at refugee camps because settlement has not been established for decades. I was appalled by my own ignorance to my privilege upon seeing others who live in resource-barren lands beyond their control. Throughout my time at JKUAT, I still witnessed countless daily scenarios of injustices but my response is no longer the same. This acceptance and deeper understanding of the context I immersed myself in was liberating, yet I wonder if this feeling will be the fuel to drive my interests further.

In my opinion, there is a thin line between acceptance and complacency. I would argue that we often mistakenly use them synonymously. In Canada, I see people subjecting themselves to complacency while claiming to accept and justify certain injustices. It certainly reminds me of the saying: *if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem*. Is my new accepting outlook a part of the solution or the first step to being part of the solution? Or can we argue that acceptance has a higher risk of leading to complacency, and therefore is more likely to be a part of the problem? I ask because I

have learned to slow down ever since returning from Kenya, to ask thoughtful questions to local friends I've made and experts in the development area. My goal is to understand the context of this rapidly developing society. In this period, a little part of me is uncertain if I am truly part of the solution and contributing positively. Additionally, I worry the more I learn now, the smaller I feel in a complex web of moving parts and the more I would start to normalize the injustices. A part of me worries: *what if I become complacent?*

Challenges with Story Telling

Upon my return, I have been surrounded with questions about my experience in Kenya from my colleagues, classmates, and friends. How do I convey a month-full of experiences, thoughts, and emotions to others in just a few minutes? This has been, and will continue to be, a challenge for me. In these interactions, I feel the pressure to condense my Kenya experience into a two-minute summary resembling an elevator pitch. On one hand, I want to convey my colourful journey painted by meeting inspiring students, adapting to a new culture, and visiting beautiful places. On the other, I want to talk about the corrupt government, the unemployment rate, and the difficult living conditions. However, because of the general public's overwhelmingly negative perception towards developing countries, I feel the constant need to shine my experience in the most positive light and omit the difficulties I've encountered. I do this because I do not want others perpetuating a negative stereotype of Kenya in the off chance I do mention a few unpleasant situations I've experienced. I realize the dishonesty in the way I have chosen to tell my story. Unfortunately, I think the pressure to do so speaks to a larger societal problem as the world falls again and again to the single story of Africa. There often feels

like there is no room for another story because those who are interested in my experience wants to hear a two-minute synopsis and not a detailed travel diary. Therefore, if a single story is all I have room for, then I choose for it to be a positive one. My hope is that during my life time, people around me will give more time to engage in a dialogue about Africa.

This also leads to the question: *How do I open that dialogue and engage others in the conversation?* This truly hit home when I presented a business idea about improving Kenya farmers' livelihoods to an Ivey Entrepreneurship Project Coordinator. His main piece of feedback is that I have lost him because he could not relate or truly understand the problem. If the audience cannot relate to the problem, he/she will not be compelled or interested in the solution. Our Coordinator then suggested we take time to understand how we can explore our audience's profile, and shape our problem pitch to what they prioritize. I hope to apply this methodology to parts of my life as well when I share my experiences in development or attempt to engage other's in the development dialogue. I am not certain how this will look like yet, but my first step is to be more vocal about my experiences through creating an online platform so those who are interested can have a place to go to incite discussions on global development.