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Learning from Experience: The Forest City Film Festival and Life*Spin

Madeline Braney

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Madeline Braney

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Dr. Barbara Bruce

Learning from Experience: The Forest City Film Festival and Life*Spin

Forward

Re-reading my Community Engaged Learning reports from both internships, I realize I have learned a great deal. While my internships with the Forest City Film Festival and Life*Spin were two vastly different experiences, they have both provided me with the opportunity to learn from the London community. Internships are often meant to expose one to a potential career in an industry of interest or to gain experience in a particular field before seeking a more permanent position. However, I believe that the true value of this experience lies in the life skills I have acquired and both the affirmations and challenges to my values, rather than an affirmation of a particular career path. Life*Spin reminded me of my advocate nature: I hope to always be a voice on behalf of those who seek one and an ally to those whose voices are already heard. The Forest City Film Festival reminded me of the way in which art, in any form, fosters community and the ways in which I have embraced art into my life, using it not only as a guiding force but also as a representation of the person I am. One is not more valuable than the other, because one is more selfless; I am both advocate and artist equally, and I hope to have a continued balance between the two in my future, with one as a representation of the importance of supporting others and one as a representation of the importance of supporting myself.

In hindsight, I wish that I had been less hard on myself throughout my Community Engaged Learning experiences and, more so, my undergraduate degree. So much of this pressure came from a place of yearning for belonging, as so many of us have. I do not leave these experiences with a destined career, but I do leave with the knowledge I have acquired and friends I have made along the way. Perhaps the purpose of both Community Engaged Learning and SASAH is not to find a strikingly perfect fit for one's future or a box to place oneself in. Perhaps the purpose is to prove to ourselves how versatile and unique we each are, to be able to engage meaningfully with the world around us, through so many different mediums. What I mean to say is, what I will carry with me the most is knowing my capabilities.

Forest City Film Festival

The Forest City Film Festival showcases films of varying styles, genres, and lengths with ties to Southwestern Ontario, whether through filming location, film content, or filmmakers. Beyond the festival's main purpose of putting Southwestern Ontario on the film industry "map," the Forest City Film Festival fosters a sense of community and highlights the importance of the arts and supporting local artistry and independent projects.

While interning with the Forest City Film Festival, I worked with a marketing team comprised of other Western students. Within this group, I collaborated with three of my fellow-interns on the festival's social media. In August, the marketing team was responsible for watching all the films in competition, to become acquainted with each film and filmmaker's style. This experience in film allowed me to develop a critical eye while watching any given film, in addition to appreciating the work that goes into a film of any given length. This was an essential first task as we would later act as concierges to the filmmakers and have direct contact with a small group of the filmmakers in festival.

Working remotely during the month of August posed challenges but offered a new experience. It taught me the value of face-to-face meetings and the productivity that can arise from being in the same space as someone you are working with. Nevertheless, it presented the opportunity to become involved in a project of interest, without having to commit to the location where the project takes place. As this was my first experience working remotely, I have gained insight into how off-site work differs from on-site work, and I will be better prepared for future job opportunities knowing the challenges and rewards that come with working from home. However, face-to-face communication and problem solving in the same space made the preparation process much easier as any clarification issues that came from online communication were resolved. From this, I learnt the value of in-person communication. I was reminded of the importance of fostering meaningful work relationships or partnerships. It can be easy to forget the role of friendship in any given profession, though having good relationships with your co-workers is something I would consider essential.

I also learnt the importance of asking questions. With a new position or job comes pressure to be prepared and knowledgeable, and thus, having questions or being unsure of any particular task has sometimes led me to feel unqualified. Especially while working remotely, where the means of communication is restricted to email or video calls, I realized the importance of clarity and the value of active question-asking. Rather than seeming unprepared, I now understand that, through asking questions, I was able to show that I was engaged in my work and projects, and as a result, I was better able to complete what I was working on.

In the month that followed, I was assigned as concierge to five filmmakers: Kari Townsend, Jesse Crump, Caroline Norton, Caroline Monet, and Shane Supernova. In this position, I was responsible for informing the filmmakers of the program and events of the

festival and was able to establish a genuine correspondence with them, in which we discussed their experiences in film and the motivations behind their current projects. This was rewarding in that I was able to make their experience with the Forest City Film Festival more valuable and was given insight into each artist's unique journey, learning that there are many ways to arrive at the same destination. Prior to my internship with the Forest City Film Festival, I did not have an extensive knowledge of the filmmaking process and had expected many of the filmmakers to be similar to one another, in background or future aspirations for film. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that even within the small group of filmmakers to whom I was a concierge, there was incredible diversity. Caroline Monet's film, *Forest City: A Documentary*, focused on the environment and the future of London's forests. Kari Townsend's film, *Girl of My Dreams*, was a short documentary about her very personal story with adoption and becoming a mother. Jesse Crump is a filmmaker only a few years older than me. When watching films, we, as an audience, focus on the plot and characters, often with little consideration to the external factors that are essential to the film's creation. Having this sort of backstage access to the filmmakers brought new meaning to film, and I wish that the rest of the world had this sort of unbridled access to the world of film. I so often think that, if art processes were more transparent, perhaps the artist would be more valued.

Later tasks included editing blog posts to market them effectively across the festival's various social-media platforms and developing a standard of best practices for posting, with particular attention to posting times and content type. I gained an extensive knowledge in social-media marketing and the significance of an effective online presence for businesses.

Eventually, I was responsible for writing three to four tweets a day and captions to promote the films in festival or upcoming events. This allowed me to exercise the skill of

writing pithy blurbs, while detailing important information in a small character limit. This will be useful not only in future marketing endeavours but also in my academic writing.

On Thursday, September 12, I attended a press conference in which the festival lineup was announced to various media and news stations in the London area. I found this particularly fascinating, given my interest in journalism. I was taking photographs at the conference as well, which offered a learning opportunity: photography in a media environment differs from landscape photography, for example, with which I am more comfortable.

The week of the actual festival was action-packed, as expected, as we worked the box office at the Wolf Performance Hall, brushed shoulders with (some very celebrated) filmmakers, and attended the various networking events held over the course of the festival weekend. I was able to introduce the short film *Contrary* (2019) and the TIFF film *Official Secrets* (2019), starring Keira Knightley, and host a Q&A session with the *Contrary* filmmakers, Dylan Broda and Cameron Thorpe. This experience gave me insight into how to conduct a live interview and how to plan for such scenarios, or wing it, if need be. I had to be quick on my feet and convey an excited attitude, a task which was made easy by Broda and Thorpe, both of whom gave fascinating perspectives into the filmmaking process.

Having responsibilities in both my academics and internship had required me to be resourceful and efficient with my time. I learnt the importance in being flexible and willing, but also the significance in knowing when to say “no.” It can be easy for a young person to feel that each suggestion is a request that must be fulfilled. Fearing you are not doing enough and seeming incompetent, particularly when starting a new position or project, and trying to prove yourself as skilled enough is stressful. There is value, therefore, in learning how to effectively organize oneself and set limits to be able to devote time to the projects that are most important.

I am perhaps most grateful to have had the experience of editing articles written by my fellow interns. It feels as though, in university, we as students and classmates are much less connected to one another's work. I, however, draw inspiration from learning from my peers and their unique styles and perspectives. Having access to my colleagues' work, and beautiful writing, reminded me of my own work and writing. I had imagined myself as a journalist for many years but became discouraged over the past four years and felt particularly disconnected from journalistic work. Reading my fellow interns' articles reminded me of the importance of journalism and writing as a means of communication. A small part of me felt regret, in having not applied to work instead as a writer at the film festival, though I am happy to have explored another area of interest. This was a valuable lesson: just because we may take breaks from our passions does not mean we cannot reconnect with them in the future.

SASAH had prepared me for this internship in allowing me to exercise collaboration skills and in promoting, influencing, and encouraging creativity. SASAH's interdisciplinary approach has prepared me to think outside of the box, teaching me that there is no single approach, which is important when working in a creative environment. The Forest City Film Festival also emphasizes this: the product of our team's work at the Forest City Film Festival was very much our own, we were in charge and, thus, chose the direction of the written and social content for the festival. Due to this, the structure and work environment was very fluid, quite similar to SASAH.

Being in a class setting which is very discussion-based gave me the confidence to share my thoughts, not only to engage with the projects I was working on but also to ensure that my voice was heard and that I contributed to things that interest me. While it can be intimidating, I enjoy taking on leadership roles, and I am thankful that SASAH has encouraged this.

Furthermore, both my experiences with SASAH and the Forest City Film Festival have ultimately taught me the value in producing work that is uniquely your own; to feel proud of what you have accomplished, in any particular job or setting, is perhaps the most rewarding feeling that can come from it.



Life*Spin

Life*Spin is a non-profit organization which advocates and provides resources for low-income families in London, Ontario. The organization started with a vision from Jacqueline Thompson; a single mother at the time, Jacqueline, along with a small group of women, decided to attend university. Through this, the group acquired resources and knowledge, eventually overcoming their low-economic status. They have since made it a mission to help others in their community to do the same, by providing educational resources, economic workshops and social groups, and several affordable housing units for rent. With these successful services, Life*Spin is exemplary in its mission to aid and avert poverty in London, Ontario, working to dismantle institutional barriers which prevent low-income citizens from acquiring livable wages by demanding necessary rights and resources.

Tasks and Experiences

On Tuesday, January 14th, I was assigned with my deliverable project. I was tasked with forming a business plan which proposes the implementation of a Community Land Trust (CLT) in London. I began with preliminary research to better understand what a CLT is and the complexities of this affordable housing model. This involved a case-study analysis of pre-existing CLTs across North America, which involved reading legal documents and processes available through several CLT websites as well as testimonies and histories given by board members. I was given the opportunity to collaborate on this project with Western law student, Conor McGarvey, who worked more specifically on the legal portions of the document and provided a background of various affordable housing models.

CLTs were first introduced in the United States during the 1960s to provide affordable housing and land for African American farmers. The model has since been used across the United States, with perhaps the best-known example in Burlington, Vermont (BCLT). BCLT was first proposed in the 1980s and is gaining attention, as the project was championed by Bernie Sanders, who was the Mayor of Burlington when it was implemented. There are currently fourteen CLTs across Canada, with 6 (and counting) in Ontario. I have reached out to several in-province CLTs in various stages of development, with a friendly response from the Friends of Kensington CLT, who have invited Life*Spin to a national CLT meeting in April.

On Tuesday, March 3rd, I had my final meeting with Jacquie and Myrna, where I proposed the draft CLT business plan and discussed next steps for the final draft. At this point, Jacquie had not yet read the document, and thus, much of the meeting consisted of a discussion around the focus of the business plan and the process behind compiling research and determining business advice. Conor and I had struggled with assembling a report which reflected both Life*Spin's vision for the project and what may be a more realistic approach given the case studies we analyzed, though ultimately, we were able to produce a document which satisfied both idealistic and realistic steps towards implementation.

Moreover, this project focused almost solely on research, though it stressed the importance of interpersonal connections and collaboration, and the final document allowed me to exercise already-developed skills in effective communication and concise writing.

In our research, we had encountered some hurdles, namely discovering that establishing a CLT is a lengthy process which often take years to conceptualize, let alone fully implement into a community. Achieving a CLT requires a great deal of dedication and passion from community members and municipal advisors. Life*Spin will need to write many focused and detailed plans

in the future. With this in mind, I have reconciled my disappointment over the absence of a clear and actionable goal to strive towards with understanding that projects of great importance, such as a CLT, require a large collaborative effort and cannot be accomplished overnight.

Another challenge I was presented with was writing a plan that aligns with both Life*Spin's mission and Jacquie's personal goals, while developing a report that accounts for the realities of implementing a CLT. Ultimately, Conor and I made the difficult decision to include research that works against some ideas previously shared with us, for the sake of providing Life*Spin with the most feasible plan. This research and reporting involved legal advice provided by Conor, which he had then shared with me. While I do not have the expertise in law to understand why he was advising Life*Spin to take this particular direction, his explanation for including it was sensible, and seemed to be the best option, not only for the project but for Life*Spin, as an organization. Through this experience, I learned the importance of defending my personal research and perspectives (or my colleagues) while being mindful of the ways in which the information I present may differ from the information that myself or my colleagues had originally anticipated. At our first meeting, where I presented Jacquie and Myrna with the draft, I had the challenging task of proposing mine and Conor's ideas without Conor actually being there. As I had expected, this advice was not well-received. While this did not reflect poorly on me, necessarily, I felt a need to defend Conor, and suggested that perhaps Jacquie was misunderstanding what he was proposing. I felt to be a sort of mediator in this role, which was quite interesting. Admittedly, I am often the person *being* mediated. It served as a reminder to always consider different perspectives than your own, and that sometimes, even our 'best' ideas may not truly be the best.

Working on the CLT business plan has given me insight into research-based work and the way in which research in a work environment differs from the research we conduct as students. Most notably, student projects operate with much shorter time periods, often with clear end-goals. While I only worked on the CLT business plan for a short period, I realized that this project is certainly much larger than I and even Jacquie had anticipated, and this document is a very preliminary step. Thus, working on this project has demonstrated the significance of researchers for any project, as research involves tremendous dedication and perhaps the expectation that one's work may never be truly finished: the world of information is forever expanding. With that said, this expansion is also a sign that there is something new being created each and every moment. This gives me hope for the future of this project, and for future projects of my own. I look forward to a future in which information and studies on CLTs are vast and detailed; this would mean a world in which affordable housing is less of a commodity.

Through this project and my internship with Life*Spin, I have learned the value of perseverance. At times, my deliverable was a difficult task, and I was met with many challenges throughout the process which forced me to change my approach or reach out for help. Admittedly, more mentorship would have been useful. Looking back, I feel that this project would have been a lost cause in my hands if it were not for Conor's help. Unfortunately, this project requires a lot of information which I simply do not have access to and would not understand even if I did. I chalk the lack of mentorship at times up to an experience which resulted from an ambitious vision and lack of experience. While I, at first, did not have the experience to understand the requirements and labour of implementing a CLT in London, I think Jacquie did not understand this either. It was a learning process on all of our parts, along the way. However, I ultimately gained experience in several new areas and expanded my expertise,

giving me new insights into future careers and transferrable skills, making me a more well-rounded job candidate. Most importantly, I was able to present Life*Spin with a business plan, which will be significant in fostering change in the London community and as inspiration in an ideal future, where affordable housing models, such as CLTs, are a success.

Drafting the CLT business plan with Conor has demonstrated the importance of teamwork. SASAH's emphasis on groupwork and the collective sharing of ideas has taught me to be open-minded in collaborative situations. Conor and I were both able to contribute very different skills in the writing of the plan, which has made for a well-rounded document. Furthermore, I have learnt the importance of learning from your peers. While there can be pressure to accomplish something on your own, it is also important to seek help when needed; after all, it takes a village, and writing this plan has certainly been a testimony to that.

Writing the CLT business plan has also been a testimony to the importance of self-advocacy. I believe that my constant questioning was imperative to this experience. We should always question the significance of our work, especially in relation to a larger project, and consider that there are moments in which perhaps, we should not blindly do something just because we have been told to.

I am grateful that SASAH encourages experiences beyond the usual realm of the Arts. While my peers and professors certainly all understand the value of the Arts and Humanities, SASAH's uniqueness comes from its value of diversity. My peers and I do not simply fit into one "box," nor does our program encourage us to. SASAH teaches us, through the CEL credit especially, that nothing is beyond our reach and that, in having a broad arts degree, we are not closing ourselves off to opportunities, but learning about the world around us to be able to

interact with *all of it*. I feel lucky to know that, upon leaving Western's School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities, I will have skills not only in a focused area of study but also in real life.

Final Presentation

Unfortunately, I was unable to give an in-person presentation on my CEL experiences, as classes were cancelled. While I had been nervous to present, I also worried that I was at a disadvantage, relying solely on PowerPoint and VoiceThread. Thus, I tried to make my presentation as interesting as possible and included more written information on the slides so that the viewer was not staring at a blank screen while I spoke virtually. I now understand the necessity of presentations: they reveal so much more, through the presenter's body language, inflections, and the shared nervousness that can bond a room of people.

I tried to focus on the most exciting parts of each internship and share my insights and what I have learnt from both the Forest City Film Festival and Life*Spin. I also felt it appropriate to acknowledge my supervisors and mentors, Dorothy, Nandita, Jacquie and Myrna. Much of my presentation will be similar to this report, though I hope that, by hearing my voice, it will be more personalized and bring some liveliness to the person behind the experiences.

Further Reflection

Beyond my own personal growth and knowledge, I feel that the CEL credit is an important part of connecting Western to the larger London community. It can be easy for students to feel disconnected from the city, beyond common "student" spaces. Both of my internships gave me the opportunity to learn about London from a new perspective. The Forest City Film Festival allowed me to build relationships with community members through direct

interaction in a social role. While at Life*Spin I interacted less personally with Londoners, I spent a great deal of time learning about the city, its demographics and smaller communities within its limits, and the barriers and hardships faced by London's residents.

While these internships were quite different from one another, I do believe that there may have been an underlying connection which I had previously not considered. Writing this reflection from my home, during the COVID-19 pandemic and having had my final semester of university cut short, I have grown increasingly more aware of the components that bond a community together, especially when many of us can no longer access the various communities we consider ourselves to be part of. I, like many, have turned to art. I have been reading more, singing more, and generally, feeling more attentive to the things that bring me joy but that I was "too busy" for previously. I think, art can be rather healing. When I find myself confused about the world, and its injustices, I turn to art.

As it turns out, this was something I had done all along: the Forest City Film Festival connected me to films that explored and celebrated Southwestern Ontario's more vulnerable communities, and I listened to music while riding the bus home from Life*Spin, often surrounded by London's homeless population. Both film and music in these instances led me to reflect on the things that I already knew and to consider what I did not. I think the connection between art and struggle, art and optimism, and art and understanding are quite pronounced, though perhaps many of us, as consumers of art and citizens in the world, do not take time to consider these connections.

SASAH had always explored the ways in which art connects us to humanity. We have delved into discrimination through historic novels or actionable projects aiming to prevent it. We have looked to art as the future, hoping that, someday, it is rightfully valued, both as a discipline

and as a characteristic in most of our lives. We can better understand one another through art. My time at Life*Spin demonstrated that it will take much more than art to solve the world's problems, but I do believe that art allows us to explore the world in a more meaningful way. It urges us to help those around us, by providing us with new perspectives, while allowing us to feel seen through representations which we connect to. It is a necessary community. Perhaps this is why art is so often connected with *humanity*.