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Rwanda: Culture, Society and Reconstruction CEL

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Dr. Bruce
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Final Report SASAH CEL

I have always known that my interests are in human rights work and this CEL experience has taught me a lot about what I am interested in and has given me the confidence to apply (and get accepted!) to a highly competitive internship program with the Ontario Legislature. As a first year SASAH student I sat in on a presentation on experiential learning in the SASAH Room in Weldon. I was sitting on the floor at the front because there were no seats left when I arrived (almost late because I still did not know campus that well) and I heard Professor Henri Boyi speak. He was discussing the course French 3140B: Rwanda: Culture, Society and Reconstruction, and from that moment I knew that I would be taking that course at least at some point during my undergraduate career.

A few days later I emailed Henri to set up a meeting to discuss the course. As a first-year student, I was being proactive, and I wanted to know more about the course, so I could slowly convince my parents to send me to a foreign country. Little did I know that an hour conversation later with Henri and I would be heading to Rwanda that May. It surprisingly took little convincing for my parents; I think they always knew that I would be travelling for what I wanted to study. I participated in the Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program in eighth grade and we learned about a variety of social justice issues, human rights violations, and genocides to prevent any of the sort from reoccurring by educating youth, the world changers of the generation. This program prepared me for what the Rwanda course had to offer. The course has completely transformed and shaped my life with travel, intercultural communication, community service learning and social justice.

Being in Rwanda was an experience quite unlike anything I could have imagined. It not only shaped my academic studies and being interested in post-colonial literature, but also my future hopes and desires. After the course I worked closely with Professor Boyi to organize our participation in Africa Collaboration Day which I helped with for the past three years. We created poster presentations to advertise our course, while also informing the Western community about the importance of service-learning. In addition, select students were asked to write articles for Western News based on our summative reports from the course in which I wrote about Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a Bantu philosophical term which means “I am because you are.” We as humans should look to others to form a strong collective to connect and bond in our human-ness. Much of my research with Henri was about this model and I concluded the essay by describing that Ubuntu was not a concept I could have learned without the CEL component.



Being able to work with Henri as my fourth year SASAH Internship has been very valuable. I believe experiential learning is a key component to any university degree, so SASAH is very lucky to have this as an essential component to our degrees. It is important for us as

students to go into the world after graduating with the skills to handle anything that comes at us, not just essays, exams and assignments, but real-world work-place proficiencies. The structure of SASAH allows students to effectively participate in an internship program as they are able to act appropriately, work hard, manage their time and learn from each and every experience, no matter how unconventional. SASAH is so diverse and I believe these internships only enhance how creative and special we all are. I am looking forward to hearing from my fellow cohort about their experiences abroad this past year as well as their internships. The beauty of SASAH is not only how much we learn from our incredible professors and faculty members, but what we learn from each other.



Overall, in first semester I was tasked with general organization and recruitment efforts whereas this semester I have been focussing on organizing the physical course outline, travel arrangements, presentations and more. In first semester, I recruited students from faculties across Western and organized informational sessions for students to learn about the course and encourage them to apply. Part of this outreach involved me going to classes to talk about the course and contact faculty deans and other stakeholders about the event to not only get their active support but encourage them to spread awareness. We got many applications this year and are excited to now have a full team ready for the semester. This type of experience has solidified

my interest in working with a global community and the importance of interdisciplinary education. While I am not sure that I want to remain in academia, this has taught me that I enjoy organizing groups of people and that event management is a forte of mine. I look forward to learning more about the behind the scenes of administrative work and how to run courses.

Over reading week and winter break, I worked on seeking out partners that we can work with in Rwanda. We already work with three great organizations: Caritas, Centre Marembo and Les Enfants des Diex but there is always room to grow. I met with the director of MindLeaps over Skype to organize Professor Boyi visiting the centre during reading week to further explore new partnerships. We are continuing to do this work with two other centers to expand our reach while in Rwanda. Once the semester started, I took it upon myself to create an agenda for every class to make sure we cover all we need to in the allotted time. I believe this has helped us stick with our strategic vision of the course and make sure that students feel confident and comfortable about the course. I remember that as a student, I came into this course completely blind and while standing at the airport I had no idea what I had gotten myself into (in a good way). While the unknown is important and service-learning is all about approaching a situation and taking what comes, I believe it is still important for students to be prepared and know what to expect and what is expected of them. I participated in organizing our flight times which Prof. Boyi then sent out to a travel agent to finalize. We were able to secure the cheapest flight we have ever had for this course to save students money! This was a huge accomplishment because financially accessible global opportunities are a must for undergraduate students. Experiential learning and active engagement are important programs that I continuously encourage students to participate in and by keeping costs low, this means that we can engage with more students in the future. A major change I implemented this year was to set up our OWL site. Through this platform, we

now have the ability to send documents and announcements promptly to students and have all resources in one place. I am happy to have made this course more accessible for students and it has taught me about barriers that students deal with in addition to my own previous experiences. I have been learning how to take people's visions into consideration and continue to work on my adaptability. One of the major things that the course taught me was how to be open to changes. This course is a great way to work on this skill because students bring in new ideas and these are great ways for us to improve the course and make it worthwhile for the participants.

Another component of the course is a group presentation on a theme related to Rwanda. I organized the presentation schedule, reached out to speakers, and helped students choose topics. I started off the [presentations](#) by discussing Service Learning, Civic Engagement and the benefits and goals of our course while abroad. I connected this to the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu which Prof. Boyi then elaborated on. We also reflected on what it is to be human beings. Ubuntu pertains to dignity and respect of others and being human is at the centre of the philosophy. Ultimately, it translates to "I am what I am because we all are" and how we are all interrelated. Ubuntu has been an important philosophy in my life since I took this course in 2016 and it has only strengthened my intercultural competence and communication. Teamwork is a central element to this course and has allowed me to not only continue to improve my leadership skills but also learn when to take a step back and allow others to be leaders as well.

Students in the class presented high caliber work for these presentations and shared not only the articles assigned but went further to do their own research. Rather than myself and Henri giving the students information, these presentations have allowed for organic conversation on aspects such as gender and women in Rwanda or health in Rwanda for students to not only learn more but engage with the material as well. Though, since it is a course with a travelling

component, we have also been sharing information such as travel advisories and training modules to be completed through the Student Success Centre as well as immunization requirements and packing lists. An interesting conversation was sparked when discussing the packing list because it encouraged students to ask questions about why certain things were listed such as a bathing suit but no laptops, giving students insight into what we plan to do while abroad. We try to focus the course on the important aspect, our work, rather than what we do on the weekends because ultimately, we are going there for the centres and are tourists on the side.

In addition, an important part of our course is team bonding. On February 11 we went for dinner as a team and even myself as the TA, it gave me an opportunity to really get to know the students outside of an academic setting which is extremely valuable because as soon as we get to Rwanda, we are not sitting in a classroom and rather function as each other's support systems. We try to incorporate team dinners and events so that we really get to know each other.

Outside of class I have been helping Henri create a report on our work with Centre Marembo, one of our biggest partners in Rwanda which included conducting outside research. I helped Henri create a new presentation for the 25th Commemoration of the Genocide and a new presentation on Ubuntu for the Teaching and Learning Centre at Western. One of my biggest projects was organizing our fundraisers and I have been researching fundraising platforms for online pledging and planning our annual brunch and bottle drive. I found that the best fundraising platform was on [GoFundMe](#) because you can connect your own bank account to do withdrawals without losing money! Every year we partner with a company called EggSolutions to host a [pay-as-you-can brunch in London](#) where all proceeds go to our three centres. I was the primary contact with EggSolutions as well as the London Cross Cultural Learners Centre. The brunch was a huge success but EggSolutions was supposed to deliver the food Friday morning

and did not inform us that they sent a truck on Thursday morning, so Henri and I had to scramble (pun intended) to find places to store the food and re-organize our plans!



Additionally, we began advertising for next year's cohort to start applying. I came up with this idea last semester that it would be beneficial to host information sessions with students before the school year ends to raise cross-campus awareness before course registration. We encountered an issue recently trying to assign the course as an essay course. This was an interesting experience for me because it was centered in bureaucratic loopholes. Essentially, the

French department was unable to come to an agreement about what an essay credit should look like, even though there are defined outlines for the university and so Henri and I had to meet multiple professors and conduct background research on other courses. This has been a frustrating process but all in all we have been trying to move forward and hopefully, this can be at least resolved for next year's course. As Students' Council President this year I have had to deal with my fair share of hoop-jumping but as someone who is interested in pursuing a possible future in academia, it taught me that it is not all about education, but sometimes about upholding some people's elitist views.

I am glad to have implemented more organizational mechanisms in the course to make the course smoother and more relaxed for students. Although I have previously taken this course, I have enjoyed re-visiting the topics as I now have a different perspective and lens on what we are learning. While in class in 2016 I understood the concept of intercultural competence, but it was not until being in Rwanda that I truly conceptualized its meaning. I have now had the time to reflect on my experience overall and it has changed my academic interests, career aspirations and overall attitude towards how I live my life. SASAH gave me the opportunity to take this course in the first place and ultimately supported my educational pursuits. Being able to use this opportunity to further my outreach by involving more of the student body to participate has been a great experience so far and I look forward to continuing the reflection process as I take on this role and apply it to all aspects of my life.

As my undergraduate degree comes to an end, I find myself reflecting a lot. University is an important place that allows young adults to grow, themselves and their ideas, and to learn important lessons. SASAH encourages and provides an environment for students to experience the real world, with real application. SASAH gives students, myself included, the ability to grow

upon the ideas, theories, lessons, and lectures in class in our first two years and expand upon them. I believe that as a student in SASAH, I have been exposed to more than most. I have been privileged to really connect with my lecturers, instructors, and fellow students. At this point, I am unsure how to function in an environment that is not interdisciplinary. As CEL is part of a requirement of SASAH, it allows students to apply their learnings, and even if it is done indirectly, or not at all, students are able to experience things in the real world. As TA for the Rwanda: Culture, Society and Reconstruction course, I have learned how to conduct a course, organize my peers, how a bureaucratic institution functions, how to fundraise efficiently and effectively, and most importantly how to be adaptable.

While acting as TA for Prof. Henri Boyi, I have done a lot. I essentially act as Henri's personal assistant. I help with emails, I organize events, I organize meetings, I organize class schedules, presentations and more. As a highly organized individual, I have enjoyed being in this role. As my position continues throughout the summer, the best part has yet to come. I am, at this point, unsure of what I will be doing in Rwanda, and that is the beauty of it. I find that International Service Learning has an additional aspect that differs from traditional Community Engaged Learning (CEL) and that is intercultural competence. I am going to a country, to which I am not native, and providing my assistance. This comes with a lot of training, understanding, and respect. Rwandans function differently than Canadians, just by the pure nature of belonging to different cultures. There was a running joke when I went in 2016, that Rwandans run on Rwandan time, which essentially means 30 mins-1-hour late. For someone as meticulously organized as myself, this was a really difficult lesson to learn the first time around, that I hope I have adapted better to for this upcoming May. As the TA, I primarily am going to Rwanda to assist Henri and the students in the experience, but I also work during the week the same way the

students do. I think that this added responsibility will really change my experience because I was just in my first year in 2016 in which my sole responsibility was to engage with the centres and learn from my experiences. Rwanda has changed a lot since we were last there, but I really am looking forward to another experience where everything I ever believed and was accustomed to completely reverses. When I was in Rwanda in 2016 I completely changed my educational/academic path, and I hope that, though I have a job lined up for next year and law school afterwards, it helps reinvigorate my interests and how I can further apply the teachings of the course to my life forevermore.

I have been lucky in my undergraduate career to participate in a number of community engaged learning projects. I began with this course in 2016, I then took a course in 2017 in Switzerland at the University of Geneva in International Law and International Humanitarian Law where we got the chance to immerse ourselves and truly engage in the international community. I then participated in a 6-month exchange in 2018 in Israel where I took courses on Arab-Israeli Relations and Women in Israel with CEL components where we went out into the community, engaged with various peoples and were able to reflect on the experiences. Though my CEL in 2018/2019 through being a TA will be different, I believe that in each and every experience you can learn something. I know that even Prof. Boyi learns something every year and that in itself is the importance of removing oneself from the classroom to experience the world around us.

I highly value CEL projects, though they have a lot of challenges and hardships, you ultimately will remember those experiences more than any other. I believe that there will be an increasing need for CEL experiences in school to expose students to real world problems and even to provide a different and fresh perspective on how to change them. Ultimately, these

projects shine a light on the reality of the world and how your learning has an impact on things that really matter. Though I already had a great relationship with my supervisor, Prof. Boyi, I was able to further develop our rapport in a professional setting while realizing that this course has such integral meaning to the core being of Henri that there is more to our working relationship than just organizing an agenda. I think that in these types of settings, it is important to remember that each situation is different. Henri is one of the most welcoming individuals, he invites everyone into his life, he believes in everyone, and he truly imparts change. I believe that anyone who has the chance to study with Henri, or even talk to him, knows that he is the most genuine person in the entire world. Before this program I really worked most of my course work alone or in groups in class, but Henri and I have been able to create a cohesive, well-functioning team that I am excited to continue to work with.

As a SASAH student, I truly think we think differently than many other students at Western. Henri really values a SASAH education and pushes to have many students in this course be SASAH students. He understands that SASAH students are intersectional, they are able to adapt and function in different situations, and ultimately are the best at coming up with innovative ideas such as new fundraising ideas, or to enliven old ideas, such as how we organize our brunch. I also think that SASAH provides students with empathy and understanding of others. SASAH is a diverse group of students, just like the Rwanda course, just like Canada, or Western or even Rwanda. I am able to find value in what each student does because I have been doing the same throughout my degree. Even if someone is not as organized, they tend to come up with great ideas and we can use those ideas with someone who is great at execution. I believe that everyone has their strengths, and SASAH has taught me to play to them.

This course has taught me to be interested in development work, but I am not sure if I am the one who should be on the ground. Though I have not discounted this entirely, I do not see myself as the most creative person (I have definitely improved in the last four years...). I see myself as more of an executor of a strategic vision and I would like to participate in that type of work. As I have accepted an internship at the Ontario Legislature from September-June, I look forward to doing just that and experiencing the influence of politics and policy and its execution.

Overall, all of my CEL opportunities, but this one especially, have greatly contributed to my experience at Western, but really as my growth as an individual. I have always been interested in Rwanda, and development work, and the study of post-conflict reconstruction, but it is hard to use those ideas, and see how they apply in the real world. This course gave me just that. It not only exposed me to new ideas, but it allowed me to use my past experiences, and think of ways to innovate and create change from within to make the course an even better experience for all. I am glad that Western is pushing for more experiential learning programs, and I am even more glad that SASAH has this as a necessary requirement in order to graduate. I am grateful for my placement, and all of the lessons it has taught me. But my work is not done. I still have the most amazing 5 weeks in Rwanda to look forward to, and I cannot wait!

My final presentation was an interesting experience because I am not finished this project until the end of June, so, having to write about the learning outcomes took me some time to wrap my head around. I began the presentation with an introduction into what I would be discussing which was in six different sections. First, I discussed what the course is, then the importance of international service learning, then I went into my role as a TA, I then discussed my accomplishments and objectives and how I applied SASAH to my CEL experience and finally, I discussed what I would be doing next.

In discussing the course, I mentioned that the course provides students an opportunity to learn about Rwandan society, and about themselves by serving in an international social and cultural setting. We work in the capital city Kigali with Centre Marembo, Caritas Kigali and Les Enfants de Dieu and the course is taught in French by Prof. Henri Boyi in English.

I became a TA for this course because I took the course in 2016 and have continued to work with Henri since. My duties as TA range from a variety of tasks. First, I take charge of contact and communication such as setting up fundraising platforms and contacting stakeholders. I also do a variety of booking ranging from booking the flight, fundraisers, rooms, info sessions etc. I have also taken on a goal for myself to make the course more innovative. I try to come up with new ways to get students involved (contacted deans, announced in classes, got A&H to make our event pages, had more than one info session, multiple fundraisers etc.) so that we get a wide range of student involvement before, during, and after the course. I also do a lot of logistic support by organizing the day-to-day activities with Henri. Here I help make his presentations for various speaker events (Africa Collaboration Day, Commemoration Events, Teaching & Learning Centre etc.). I also help organize the class schedule by making an agenda, I collect money, I attend events with Henri and we meet on a regular basis to answer students' questions and contact community partners. Finally, and I believe the role I have done the least so far is being a team leader. Though I do a lot of work during the school year, I mainly assist Henri with a variety of tasks and act as a student voice to the class and help with packing information, immunization, what to expect etc. In Rwanda I will be acting as a support to other students, especially in those first few weeks to help with the transition to a new culture and to Henri with any logistical assistance he needs.

Henri and I facilitate a variety of learning outcomes during the course so that students will become familiar with aspects of Rwandan history and culture, come to understand the nature of the Rwandan genocide from multiple perspectives and how the country is currently dealing with the aftermath, become aware of cultural and personal biases towards groups, places and events and work to overcome these or understand them in a new way, add to students' personal growth by sharing their thoughts, opinions and feelings about their experience in insightful and supportive group reflections, and finally, to be aware of how experiential learning can dramatically enhance the academic learning process.

Some goals I went over in the presentation that I hope to achieve are an increase in fundraising efforts, efficiency (a more streamlined schedule, organizing things such as presentations in advance, booking the flight in advance, making agendas etc.), preparedness (keeping students informed and keeping diligent notes so that we cover everything and prepare students effectively), and widespread awareness (spreading the news on campus about the course to encourage future participation).

I then moved onto the importance of International Service-Learning and the academic pedagogy that Henri facilitates his courses in, the importance of learning from experience, I discussed the Ted Talk "Shut up and Listen" and the importance of reflection.

Before my trip to Rwanda from May 16th-June 21st, 2016, I did not quite understand the meaning of *Ubuntu*, a Bantu philosophical term. I knew the definition we discussed in class: "I am because you are," as a concept of mutual human kindness, but why am I because someone else is? I had always believed my accomplishments were due to my hard work, and that everything I did was for my own personal benefit. Yet, this is exactly what I noticed change

about myself since my return to Canada that I hope this course shares the same principles with the new students.

Rwanda taught me to be more appreciative of the influences of people around me, especially those who are my support system and who have steered me to become the person I am today. The children at the Caritas taught me just as much as I tried to teach them about acceptance and collaboration. No matter where I came from or who I was, I was accepted as part of the Caritas family. We go to Rwanda to do what they need, and nothing else. We must work with the community to develop its own capacity to improve itself.

I have learnt that *Ubuntu* is not merely a concept I could have studied and philosophized if I truly intended to capture its meaning, but instead it was something I needed to experience and try to apply to my everyday life. Ultimately, my five-week visit to Rwanda taught me that *Ubuntu* is about being a better version of oneself, for mutual growth and the benefit of the collective. These are lessons I hope to impart on students and continue to work towards when I return to Rwanda in May.

Finally, I discussed how I applied SASAH to my CEL experience and next steps for me and the course. SASAH has ultimately provided me with real-world connections and the comfortability to get up and take action. More specifically, I have learned about teamwork (you know all those group projects), because we work with so many people, particularly outside of academia, effective communication is essential as well as a lot of problem solving. With SASAH's push to travel and experience the world, I have learned about intercultural competence in many areas of my academics and had the chance to experience it first-hand. Looking ahead for me in my CEL it does not end until June. We will be travelling from May-June, I will be in Israel the two weeks before to visit my sister and then going straight to Rwanda. In Rwanda I will be in

charge of facilitating the group, ensuring we function well as a team, helping Henri organize meetings, weekend trips, and funding and also, I will be working at a centre in Kigali alongside the students.

I concluded my presentation thanking Prof. Henri Boyi for everything he has done for me. Henri has truly embodied the title of a mentor. He undertook the difficult task of teaching myself and all of his students about intercultural competence as well as giving us the knowledge and skills to help us change our attitudes and prejudices in order to become better human beings for ourselves, and for others. Henri's philosophy of humanity and teaching is empathetic, compassionate and selfless. Every day he strives to make this world a better world, and in my opinion, he does just that by giving his students the training and knowledge to act as world ambassadors. He has not only changed my life but my entire outlook; he has this amazing capacity for caring about each and every person; he is the true embodiment of *ubuntu*. I am not much of a crier in these situations, but I am glad I was able to publicly show how much of a difference Henri has made in my life and in the lives of many other students.

Rwanda was a life changing experience for me, and I truly hope that it is the same for the 2019 cohort; you learn about yourself; you learn about others and most importantly, the reflection process never ends. There is a before where you learn about the country, a during while we are there for 6 weeks, and an after, which lasts a life time. Rwanda will always hold a special place in my heart where I was able to join with others to create our own unique story, with our own aspirations and passions, and to create a strong collective to work for the good of others, and for ourselves.