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Spring 2020

## Learning by Doing: Experiential Learning Through SASAH

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SASAH CEL Final Report

December 9, 2019

### Learning by Doing: Experiential Learning Through SASAH

The Community Engaged Learning portion of my SASAH degree has empowered me in ways I never anticipated when I first embarked on this course. While there were days where I wished I could forgo the requirement, having now reached the end of my placements I can confidently say I would not have wanted the last couple years to go any other way. Between participating in the North Meets South Exchange and The Walrus internship program, I can feel in both my head and my heart how much I have grown as a writer, a professional and an individual in the wake of completing these two unique opportunities.

The opportunity to attend the North Meets South Exchange fell into my lap. My mom told me about an all-expenses-paid trip offered through the Jr. Economic Club of Canada, an organization dedicated to improving financial literacy amongst youth in Canada and was adamant that I apply. While I was neither economically inclined nor incredibly involved in my community at the time, I knew it would stand out on a resumé and challenge me—everything I was hoping to get out of my summer work experience. By the time the sun set on Day One, however, I knew that the next two weeks would amount to more than just a line on my resumé. The premise was simple: bring together ten Indigenous and ten non-Indigenous youth from Ontario for a two-week crash course on Anishinaabe culture and issues facing Canada's Indigenous communities as well as business principles that have allowed some of the top companies in Canada to thrive, the little-known truths about provincial politics, and the

fundamentals of financial literacy. At the end of the two weeks, we were expected to create and present our own public-policy framework to address problems facing Indigenous communities. With an agenda like this, the experience that followed was more intense and rewarding than I could have imagined.

The North Meets South Exchange was the epitome of a hands-on learning experience. The structure of the program effectively removed me and my fellow participants from everything and everyone we knew; this immersion in a new environment forced us to focus on the present moment. While on Manitoulin Island, we spent our days in various community centres on different reserves in the area learning from community members about tenets of Anishinaabe culture and hearing stories of intergenerational trauma resulting from the legacy of Canada's residential school system. We were introduced to every facet of the Anishinaabe way of life—from beading, music, and farming to medicine, smudging, and sunrise ceremonies. We also got a glimpse of life on a reserve—from interacting with “res dogs” to hearing our Indigenous peers remark that they were going into the lake “res style” to seeing AIDS awareness posters and a plate of free condoms in the public washrooms. This total exposure effectively humanized these people and their plights and grounded in reality the history we had learned.

One issue we learned about that I found particularly striking was the extent and scale of the crisis surrounding missing and murdered Indigenous women; I did not realize how long it had been going on, nor ever really stopped long enough to contemplate what it must be like to have a family member missing for years while receiving little help from the very institutions that are supposed to protect you. I was also horrified to learn about the forced sterilizations that Indigenous women have endured throughout Canada's history, and how this grave injustice still persists today. Between learning about these various manifestations of colonization and hearing

stories from my Indigenous peers about their own experiences, I found myself examining my privilege in ways I had never considered before. It was uncomfortable to concede that, if I ever went missing, there would most likely be an immediate reaction from the police because of my privilege as a young white woman; likewise, if I required emergency medical attention or pain management medication, I would probably not be denied. Some of my new friends could not say the same. It was a bitter but necessary truth to learn, especially as we reached the end of our time on Manitoulin Island and transitioned from the educational part of the program to the action-focused portion.

In Toronto, we found ourselves hopping from boardroom to boardroom in the tallest towers on Bay Street and rubbing elbows with corporate lawyers, former politicians, and bank professionals along the way. Although I was already quite familiar with Toronto at the outset of the North Meets South Exchange, I nonetheless became familiar with a whole new side of the city that week—not only the high-powered sector and the people that occupy it but also the various physical manifestations of settler colonialism imbedded in the urban setting that previously went unnoticed to my uninformed eye. We attended presentations on professional development, public speaking, politics and self-care. Headshots were taken and connections were made on LinkedIn, all while we worked tirelessly to pull our public-policy frameworks together. At the end of the week, we had the chance to put everything we had learned into practice at Pitch Day, where we presented our proposals to a room full of our families, mentors, and community partners.

My group's pitch was focused on addressing and preventing suicides amongst Indigenous youth populations in rural communities. For the duration of the two-week program, the participants were accompanied by two counsellors, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous

individual, who were there for us to talk to when the need arose, such as when subject matter from a discussion hit a little too close to home or was weighing heavy on our collective conscience. In speaking with our Indigenous counsellor, Lisa, the group learned about the difficulties remote and rural Indigenous communities face when trying to access mental health resources. These resources are extremely scarce to begin with in these regions; what little services there are to be found often offer limited access or availability for youth. On top of these barriers, counsellors are typically unprepared to provide mental health support for Indigenous youth using a trauma-informed approach.

This trauma-informed approach is crucial, for the manner in which Indigenous youth navigate their world and make relationships today is often mitigated and affected by the intergenerational trauma stemming from Canada's residential school system that many have inherited through stories of the experiences their family members and ancestors endured under this cruel system. For this reason, most youth would also prefer to speak to an Indigenous counsellor, who will have a better understanding of the cultural background from which these youth are coming. Yet, there are few Indigenous counsellors available as many Indigenous people on reserve do not have the opportunity to attend post-secondary school or obtain certifications in the applicable fields. Conversely, when individuals leave the reserve, it is often difficult for them to return for various social and economic reasons.

In looking to tackle this big issue, my group proposed both broad solutions that were long-term and wide in scope, as well as a few smaller-scale, concrete solutions. One I was particularly enthused about was creating a one-session training program akin to the safeTALK program that already exists, geared toward caring for the mental health of Indigenous youth. This training program would be specifically designed to inform participants of Canada's colonial

legacy and the lasting impacts of its harmful policies on Indigenous people today, while also arming them with basic mental health first aid and suicide awareness. The inherent mobility in this training program means that it could be conducted in more remote communities, and that pre-existing community leaders such as Indigenous elders could receive some specific tools and training to help combat the omnipresent suicide crisis across Indigenous youth populations today without having to leave the community or commit to a full bachelor's degree. This idea stemmed from safeTALK sessions I have attended throughout my time at Western that have trained me in suicide awareness and prepared me to help someone who is having thoughts of suicide get to a place of safety. In meeting people from the Anishinaabe community on Manitoulin Island and hearing their stories of coping with trauma, it became abundantly clear that simple solutions like this could drastically change the quality of life for youth in remote areas. My group and I did our best to promote both the necessity and viability of these solutions in our pitch presentation and public-policy framework.

The most interesting part about the North Meets South Exchange was easily the people—those who ran it and those who were going through it alongside me. The North Meets South Exchange was orchestrated by the all-female executive team at the Jr. Economic Club of Canada. As someone who has always assumed I would be unwelcome in the world of business and politics, I found it profoundly moving to see women like myself thriving in those circles and taking on leadership roles, all while fiercely supporting each other. I was particularly enamored with the founder of the Jr. Economic Club of Canada, Rhiannon Rosalind. She was so eloquent yet so genuine in a way I would never expect from someone who held the titles of President and CEO, let alone a woman in the often unforgiving, male-dominated world of business. She was honest about the many struggles she had encountered in life and took time to get to know each

participant, while being fully present for each activity. She also showed us first-hand how she manages to balance her roles as a mother and a businesswoman, for she brought her eldest son along on the trip to give him an introduction to the work of truth and reconciliation. I quickly came to idolize Rhiannon along with her team of powerful and intelligent young women not only for their ability to run a successful and renowned collective but also for their commitment to doing so without sacrificing their health, humanity or their femininity.

My fellow participants were some of the most fascinating people I have ever met. We were as different as can be: some were just finishing middle school, some had graduated university, and others had already started families of their own. Yet, a program centered around the heavy subject of truth and reconciliation necessitates that its participants be vulnerable; you cannot help but bond with those around you. Although we began as strangers, we soon came to lean on each other for support as we worked through our shock, anger, and retroactive grief over the atrocities committed against Indigenous people both in the past and in the present day. As the group cultivated a safe space, I practiced opening up to others; in doing so, I came to understand the strength and depth of connection that can come from moments of vulnerability. I became particularly close with one participant, Jonathan, who was as magnetic and easygoing as a person could be. He was kind when people asked to touch his afro, even though I had learned that was a microaggression. He was exceedingly energetic and unapologetically passionate. In fact, we bonded over our mutual love of poetry. He shared his with me, and even managed to convince me to show him some of my own—a level of vulnerability in which I seldom indulged. Between lessons, the group would relax by conducting makeshift yoga classes, playing pick-up beach volleyball and frisbee-baseball, taking dips in the lake and even learning songs in Anishinaabemowin on a traditional drum. In all those shared moments of tears and laughter,

friendships were forged across historical, cultural, and geographical divides—ones that I still maintain to this day.

One key takeaway I have reflected on a lot since concluding my exchange is that there are few opportunities for Indigenous people to embrace their culture in life as I know it. From the moment I left Manitoulin, I found myself having to carve out spaces to carry on the traditions and conversations we started while on the island. In order to smudge at the end of the day, we had to go outside for fear of setting off a smoke alarm. We had to scrounge around for a patch of grass to ground our bare feet in before performing any of the songs we had learned. It took all my courage to ignore the people staring as we stood in a circle and beat our drums. The more time that passes, the more apparent it becomes that opportunities or forums to keep this conversation going are rare: if you are going to be a good advocate and ally, you must create these opportunities yourself.

Aside from the obvious educational component surrounding truth and reconciliation, this program allowed me to hone crucial transferrable skills. Embarking on this exchange pushed me far out of my comfort zone and taught me how to adapt and thrive in unfamiliar settings. Furthermore, my experience with Pitch Day allowed me to fine-tune my presentation skills, and our workshops on Bay Street helped me to conquer my fear of networking. I found it fulfilling not only to foster relationships with community members and corporate professionals alike but also to take what I had learned from them and use it to educate people in my own community. Collaborating on the public policy taught me that, to be a strong ally and leader, one must learn when to take the lead and when to empower others to lead. It also improved my ability to communicate, actively listen, and resolve conflicts. This experience revealed my passion for

policy and advocacy, especially when it comes to advocating for marginalized groups like Indigenous peoples—a path I would never have considered if it were not for this opportunity.

This exchange tied in nicely with my academic journey as an Arts & Humanities student. My skillset was essential in preparing my group's public-policy framework, as it needed to be of a high calibre before it was presented to a room of community partners and mailed to the provincial legislature—and most of my group members were in high school. Thus, my degree proved to be both useful and dynamic, for I was able to understand and incorporate the information and style of writing necessary to make our policy framework legitimate, even though I am not a political-science student. Without my critical thinking, creativity, editing and writing skills, and understanding of rhetoric, that policy would not have reached its full potential.

The focus on critical thinking and self-knowledge present throughout the exchange mimicked the principles imbedded in the SASAH program. This program informed conversations from my undergraduate classes (both inside and outside of SASAH) around colonialism, taking up space as a white settler, and making space for others to speak who have been historically oppressed and excluded from dominant narratives. Additionally, the teamwork components from this CEL experience not only built upon my past experiences with group projects for SASAH, such as the cemetery project from first year, but also helped to prepare me for success in completing my capstone project as part of this year's SASAH seminar course. Furthermore, SASAH's tendency to attract all types of people and to encourage honest group discussions primed me for this experience, as the North Meets South Exchange also attracted people from all walks of life and thrived on open discussions. Thus, this exchange aligned well with SASAH's mission to create informed and empathetic global citizens.

Whereas the opportunity to participate in the North Meets South Exchange came together on a whim, I had conversely been awaiting the chance to apply for an intern position at The Walrus magazine since the very beginning of my undergraduate degree in SASAH. As I met more students in the program and heard about their experiences with it, I found myself eagerly awaiting my chance to seize the opportunity. I have always enjoyed writing and editing, and the more I thought about it, the more I believed journalism could be a good fit for me. At the same time, as someone who struggles with committing to long-term goals and settling on a single life plan, I was excited for the chance to try out this career path before I devoted myself to it fully. Now, having done the internship, I can confidently say that, unsurprisingly, the opportunity to work as an intern at The Walrus magazine was a formative experience for myself as a student and a professional.

I was assigned a wide variety of tasks throughout my internship; I found myself learning new skills each week in unexpected areas including audio editing and podcast creation. Collaborating with Angela Misri, the Digital Director at The Walrus, on her podcast for the Ryerson Image Center's latest gallery opening was rewarding. The task not only educated me on the history of the female gaze and African portraiture (something I may never have otherwise learned about), but also allowed me to hone skills such as organization, critical thinking and active listening as I poured over the interviews and kept a record of exceptional quotes to be featured. During this project, Angela invited me to shadow her as she interviewed people for the podcast in an audio recording suite at Ryerson University, which allowed me to closely observe not only her interview technique but also the technical side of creating a high-quality recording. Another task that pushed me to develop my skillset was editing background music clips and compile a library of images for a web series, which built upon prior knowledge I acquired from a

computer-science course in university. These projects emphasized for me not only the importance of having a diverse skillset when looking to break into the media industry, but also the value of being able to learn on the job and being willing to teach yourself a new skill as you go. It was also quite fun to get out of my comfort zone and try my hand at more technological tasks.

Other days, I was preoccupied with research tasks regarding miscellaneous topics ranging from the history of denim to illegal activities like money laundering, fraud, and offshore banking. These tasks directly built on my experiences in undergrad—and in SASAH, in particular—as we have had to research many unorthodox topics in the past; thanks to these experiences, I knew how to use creative solutions to find accurate and relevant information from reliable sources. When I was not working on any of these projects, I was tasked with reviewing archived articles on the Walrus website to ensure their coding and settings were in good order, which I was able to do only because of my second-year SASAH course that taught me rudimentary coding with HTML and CSS. In addition, I was asked to consult with Jessica, the Editor-in-Chief, on a syllabus she was developing for an upcoming course on #MeToo and the Media at the University of Toronto. With this task, in particular, I found myself thinking critically and historically about what relevant materials could be included and which assignments would be the best reflection of learning objectives. This line of thought inevitably brought me back to my classroom experiences with SASAH, where I have been asked to read a wide range of materials and been given unique and challenging projects. These tasks as an intern taught me the importance of taking initiative when starting out as a young professional, for I fear I may not have left quite as good of an impression on my supervisors had I not been willing to approach them with my own ideas, such as when I compiled a list of materials and topics to give to

Jessica, and issues I had encountered while completing the tasks they assigned me, like when I was reviewing the code on the new website. By going the extra mile with each project, I was able to establish lasting connections in industry, which can be an invaluable resource considering the ever-changing nature of media today.

In the office, I had the chance to observe the daily processes crucial to running a successful publication. Renée Montpellier, the head of Human Resources at The Walrus, specifically placed the intern table in the middle of the office so that we could see first-hand how everything operated. This location certainly served that aim; for instance, I can distinctly remember the energy in the office on the day that the latest issue was being shipped out—namely, the palpable, frenetic tension and flurry of activity that accompanied it. I can recall the small cheers that erupted throughout the office when we heard that Céline Dion retweeted a profile written about her for The Walrus. These examples, however, were outside the norm. Having never worked an “office” job before, I found myself continually adjusting to office culture and expectations throughout this internship. This informal education did come with a learning curve; most days I felt mildly suffocated by the quiet, insular culture in the bullpen, where most people would listen to music on headphones so large I could tell they wanted to be left alone. As I met more people and was assigned bigger projects, however, I began to overcome these feelings of loneliness, and my sense of imposter syndrome diminished dramatically.

Although I was not as busy as I was hoping to be, I gained more from my six weeks at The Walrus than I realized as I was going through it. I sat in on brainstorming meetings within the Digital department and contributed my own ideas where I could. I got accustomed to the rhythms of putting a project together in a professional setting: the back and forth between meetings and research, the preparations and communication required, the ideas that are not

feasible enough to make it out of brainstorming sessions. I was assigned a variety of hands-on exercises—from building posts on a content-management system, selecting excerpts from print books for online publication, and brainstorming segments for upcoming web series as well as print articles being put online to shadow editing an article and crafting a pitch for my own article—that allowed me to develop editorial skills.

I had various opportunities to shadow the editors as well as work with them one on one. I bore witness to the editorial team's review of their latest issue, colloquially known as a “deep dive,” where the editors go over each piece for the rest of the team. I was also invited to attend a workshop on longform journalism hosted by one of the editors, Carmine Starnino, along with the post-grad journalism fellows working at the magazine. While sitting in on this seminar, I quietly reflected on how much I had grown in such a short time as I found myself understanding industry jargon that I would have been stumped by just weeks prior. The most valuable portion of the internship for me, however, was the masterclass I received on pitching from my supervisor Lauren McKeon, Digital Editor at The Walrus. Her industry insight and wisdom stemming from her personal experiences was invaluable as it gave me a better idea of the state of the industry today. I was particularly grateful for the opportunity to practice crafting pitches under her counsel, for her attentive feedback helped to elevate my skills as a writer and gave me clear ideas of which areas I need to improve on going forward.

In terms of soft skills, I learned a lot about different leadership styles through interactions with various office staff. Lauren was a good mentor: she was kind, detailed, and informative in all of our meetings. However, she was not proactive about checking in with me nor especially warm, and there were many days where I felt she was unprepared for my arrival, scrounging for tasks to keep me busy. Angela, on the other hand, looked for every opportunity to involve me in

projects and teach me new skills. Yet, there was a time where Angela neglected to turn a simple mistake of mine into a teaching moment; in fact, I did not know I had made a mistake until I followed up with her about the project. On the whole, I found fairly reliable and helpful mentors in these women, but learned quickly that I had to take responsibility for my own learning for, while I could tell they cared about my professional development, I was not the only demand of their job, and would only get as much out of this experience as I put into it.

Admittedly, my time at the magazine was not perfect. There were projects scheduled for the internship that we did not get to, and there were weeks where my supervisors were absent. I never really felt integrated into the workplace, and many of the tasks I was doing felt inconsequential. All of these factors combined made it difficult some days to put my best foot forward. Nonetheless, in retrospect, my time at the publication gave me everything I was looking to get out of it and helped me to clarify my life goals and career ambitions. This internship undoubtedly provided me with valuable professional experiences, practical skills and connections. It gave me a sense of the reality of the journalism industry and confirmed that I have not only a strong communications skillset but also an interest in the media industry, and I am able to learn on the job. I hope to one day use all that I have gained to successfully pitch articles not only to the Walrus but also other publications. From there, I hope to build a career as a writer and journalist.

Synthesizing my two experiences for my final presentation proved to be a real challenge, as I not only enjoy public speaking immensely but am also incredibly passionate about each of these experiences; I was eager to share everything that had happened during these combined eight weeks with my peers. Time constraints being what they are, I did my best to balance summarizing my projects in detail while leaving enough time to reflect on what these

experiences were really like and what they meant to me. Nonetheless, preparing the presentation provided a wonderful opportunity for reflection on how both projects have contributed to where I am now in life. For instance, I would not have run for English Department Representative on Arts and Humanities Students' Council last year if it were not for the knowledge and skills I gained from the North Meets South Exchange; likewise, I would not have submitted my work to two publications this semester (and to that end, be accepted for publication each time!) had I not gained the expertise and confidence necessary to put my work out there from interning at The Walrus. It was rewarding to consider the lasting impacts of these formative experiences on my life trajectory.

Looking back on my two CEL projects, I can see that they share more in common than I initially realized. With both experiences, I fell victim to imposter syndrome to a degree; however, by pushing myself to stay present in the moment and do my best each day, I was able to overcome those feelings of inadequacy and emerge from each experience with new abilities and knowledge. As well, each project challenged me to adapt and expand both my skillset and the limits I had unwittingly imposed upon myself and my imagination. Engaging with these community organizations proved to me how applicable and transferrable my degree truly is, introduced me to spheres of work I may otherwise have never considered, and pushed me to see my community in a whole new light. These experiences have renewed my outlook on life—and the potential career paths I could pursue.

While the process of completing these two very different programs was overwhelming and daunting at times, I would do them both all over again in a heartbeat if it did not mean that I was taking a spot away from someone else who had not had the chance to participate. These opportunities effectively grounded what I had learned from my undergrad in the real world and

showed me what it felt like to put those skills to good use for something other than a grade—whether it is making a difference in my community or discovering stories worth sharing. This was a timely lesson, for come graduation I will need a more intrinsic motivator to be civically engaged, and the confidence to go after opportunities I may not immediately feel ready for.

Above all, these experiences proved to me not only that you can be both young and formidable, but also that your power does not run out along with your youth: there is always time to do good in the world, and there is always more work to be done.