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Finding the Path Beneath My Feet

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The Community Engaged Learning program through the University of Western Ontario and the School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities is an amazing opportunity for students to try out different potential career fields, learn about their interests and abilities, and build skills and experience to take forward into the working world. When I started at university, I had no idea what I wanted my life to look like after I earned my degree. I knew I loved writing and learning, knew I was smart and hardworking, knew I had a lot of useful skills, but I was unsure of how to turn any of that into an actual plan—or even what options were available to me. My two CEL experiences, working as a Teaching Assistant for the second-year Digital Humanities SASAH course and working as an intern at the London Children's Museum, taught me a lot about my interests, my skills, and my options and helped me to develop a better understanding of and plan for my future.

I have always been interested in learning about a lot of things. As the daughter of two graduates from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I was immersed in learning from a young age—I learned the lobes of the brain alongside the days of the week, yelled "Photons!" when the lights turned on, and asked for someone to "Please pass the sodium chloride" at the dinner table. My parents nurtured that love of learning, and they sought to surround me with people who would do the same. In elementary school, I did not always fit in with the other kids, but my teachers pushed me to write stories or enter competitions or skip grades in math,

encouraging me to not just coast through on work that was “good enough” but put in the effort to climb to my very best. In high school, I was finally surrounded by other students who were as smart and driven as I was. For the first time, I was not an outsider or an outlier—I had friends. I belonged. And when it came time to head off to university... I was afraid to leave that behind, afraid I would not be able to find a community like that again.

When I first heard about SASAH, I was uncertain it was for me. It sounded too competitive, too intense for my tastes. I am not opposed to a challenge, but I wanted something I could have fun with as well. But as I heard about it a second time and a third, as I talked to Dr. Joel Faflak and the students in the program, I slowly realized that SASAH was not about academic brilliance—it was about passion. It was about learning in all different disciplines and being excited for each new area of exploration. It was about examining the connections between each supposedly separate subject and seeing how they interacted and intersected. It was exactly who I was and exactly what I was looking for.

My time in the SASAH program has only confirmed that impression for me. Classes cover every topic under the sun, from art to literature to history to philosophy, and the projects are open-ended and creative. Students can create art pieces or compose poems instead of just writing essays, and although I mostly stuck to the more traditional formats, I was able to research and analyze subjects I was genuinely passionate about. I wrote essays on such unusual subjects as filk music or science fantasy podcasts, allowing me to feel truly excited about my work and to see something I already loved in an entirely new way. SASAH reinforced my belief that there is nothing that we cannot learn from, that education can come in all kinds of forms, and that learning not only can be fun, but it *should* be.

These perspectives were at the heart of both of my CEL experiences. Although the Digital Humanities TA-ship and the LCM internship were two very different roles with different environments and audiences, and although I came to them in different ways and for different reasons, they grew from the same core beliefs and passions. In retrospect, the similarities are obvious: both positions were based in education but in a less formal way, both roles had a focus on interdisciplinarity, and both had a strong basis in translating concepts to be accessible to different audiences. From teaching coding to Arts and Humanities students to showing young kids the science in their everyday lives, these were roles of curiosity, discovery, and excitement.

I was initially interested in the Digital Humanities TA position in my third year for a few reasons. I had enjoyed the class the previous year and felt like it had a lot of valuable information and discussion, but I also felt like it frequently got sidetracked by tangents or troubleshooting of code. Several major assignments were only explained late in the year, and feedback was scarce. I wanted to be a more accessible resource for students—many of them already had me on Facebook, so it was easy to shoot me an informal message that I could usually reply to within the hour, instead of them carefully drafting a respectful email to their professor who might not get back to them for a day or two. I saw my role as more of an older friend than a teacher; I had responsibility and respect and knowledge, but I was not an authority by any means—I was not an authority figure in the classroom and I was not an authority on all things HTML. I was figuring things out as we went; I just had a little more experience at how to do that. And I was not there to encourage them to be rigid and formal and academic—coding, of course, requires a certain amount of inflexibility, but it is also very much a creative process. I wanted them to play around with colours and fonts, to hide Easter eggs in their code, to approach the lessons and assignments as something to have *fun* with. Because to me, coding is fun.

That was the second reason I was interested in this position. I wanted to share that sense of fun, that playfulness and passion, that excitement to learn and explore and discover and try things just to see what would happen, just to see if I could. I have always loved learning, and I have always believed that the best way to get someone to care about what they are learning is to have a teacher who cares. Excitement is contagious, and there is so much to be excited about in so many fields. Many of the SASAH students saw coding as unfamiliar territory, something they were not sure they could do, something they were nervous about—but I saw it as a game. I wanted to invite them to come play with me.

Finally, I felt uniquely positioned to make STEM concepts more accessible to non-STEM students because I have always had a foot in both worlds. My mother was a neuroscientist and my father a computer programmer, so I grew up surrounded by science, math, and technology. At the same time, some of my earliest memories are of writing stories and putting together little books illustrated with stickers and crayons. In school, I did well in subjects on both sides of the divide, excelling in math contests and spelling bees alike. I ultimately chose to pursue the Arts and Humanities because that was where I found my passion, where I could imagine myself spending the rest of my life, but I always saw the value in both domains, saw the joy in both. My upbringing means I understand many of the similarities and contrasts between the fields and the ways they approach the world: STEM subjects tend to be more regimented and specific, in contrast to the open-ended and uncertain exploration of A&H disciplines. It can be difficult to wrap your head around, to switch from questions and meandering contemplation to strict, formulaic blocks of logic. But I do not believe anyone is built for only one such mode of thinking. One might come easier than the other, but they can both be learned. It is simply a new language—but as someone who speaks both, who loves both, I want to translate it.

Much of my role in this course was simply as a helpful bystander keeping things on track: troubleshooting code so that Professor McDayter would not have to pause the lesson for every computer error, answering simple questions and offering feedback, and just being a more accessible learning support for many students. I was also only able to attend one of the two class days each week, so the days I was present focused more on coding while the days I was absent focused on theory and discussion, helping the course to stay more on schedule and cover the intended material. My contributions reminded me that even small details can make a big difference in the right place.

Professor McDayter also offered me the opportunity to lead one of the lessons, providing me with a previous PowerPoint presentation he had put together on the subject of CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and inviting me to adapt it to my own style. Planning out the different explanations, demonstrations, and work-along examples for the presentation was useful both in forming a better understanding of the teaching process and in developing new presentation skills. I had of course done plenty of in-class presentations before, but never so long or on a topic that was so unfamiliar to my audience. I also realized how difficult it is to assess how much time a lesson might take—I did not have time to run the full hour-long presentation in advance, but even if I had, it is easy to get caught up in an example or a question that takes longer than expected, or conversely to accidentally speed up or skip something on the day of. Thus, a teacher has to know what material can be skimmed or moved to a future class if necessary but must also know how to fill gaps should they arise.

To finish off this CEL credit, I put together a video examining the dichotomy between STEM and A&H subjects. The process of crafting the video felt like an appropriate melding of creativity and technology, and the subject was central to both my choice of CEL experience and

the Digital Humanities course itself. I asked students about their perspectives on the dichotomy, on their place within this divide, on how these two groups could influence and inform and improve each other—and I was pleased to find that many subjects were very much in favour of breaking down the perceived boundaries. Further, the SASAH students I spoke with all agreed that the Digital Humanities course had been an extremely enriching experience, with valuable discussions and important concepts that had stuck with them over the years, and although they had initially been wary of coding, they ultimately found it to be much more accessible and enjoyable than they had anticipated.

I did my first CEL experience in my third year of university, but I did not complete my second half-credit until two years later. In that time, I looked into various ideas, applied to a few jobs that fell through, and carefully avoided any and all questions about my plans after university. Part of the problem was that I had very little idea what I wanted to do. I knew I was interested in writing, but there is not exactly a direct career trajectory for such a path—you either do it or you don't. Some people suggested graduate school, but I was unsure what I would study—my major is out of the question for complicated personal reasons, and besides, I have always been more interested in breadth than depth. And although I liked the idea of educational work, I do not have the temperament for schoolteaching.

Then, in March of my fourth year, I had the opportunity to speak with Shelley Ambrose at the SASAH Advisory Council Networking Event. Each member of the Advisory Council had their own approach to our brief conversations, and Shelley's is perhaps best described as "Tell me about yourself, and then I will tell you what you want for your future and how to get there." And she did. In mere minutes, she pointed out to me the way I lit up when I talked about science communication, and as soon as she recommended museum work, I was floored that such an

application of my interests and skills had never occurred to me before. It was so clearly a perfect fit—diverse subjects, interdisciplinarity, creativity, learning, it was all right there. I had just never seen it.

With this new idea buzzing in my head, for my second CEL experience I reached out to the London Children's Museum and connected with Hannah Platt, the Program Facilitator. Western had no previous arrangement with the LCM, so I worked with her to develop an entirely new CEL experience. While we were not able to realize every single idea we came up with due to time or circumstance or simply biting off more than we could chew, the breadth of ideas meant I had a great deal of flexibility to explore. Even the areas left unexplored will hopefully add value in future, by laying the groundwork for future CEL collaborations that could span a wide variety of skills, duties, and interests to suit individual students. For my part, I was able to be involved with numerous activities and duties which taught me about many different aspects of museum work, education, and working with children. This was my first intentional exploration of what it might be like to work in the field of educational communication, and I learned so much from the LCM in general and from Hannah in particular, who was an extremely supportive and informative mentor.

My primary role at the LCM was helping with the Early Years' Play Dates on Tuesday mornings. Aimed at pre-school aged children, mostly around five and under, these programs had a variety of materials and activities for kids to interact and play with. There were sensory bins filled with rice or oatmeal or birdseed, artistic activities like paint or crayons or play dough, scarves or necklaces to try on. These materials changed week to week, but there was almost always a carpet of board books for the quieter kids and a section of foam climbing blocks and tunnels for those with more energy. I gained a lot of experience working with kids of various

ages, abilities, and interests, finding ways to relate and connect and play at different levels and working out a balance of offering ideas for play and following the children's lead. Working these events was rewarding, but could also be draining, and confirmed to me that although I might enjoy some aspects of being a schoolteacher, being solely responsible for so many children for so long would strain my energy and my patience. At an institution like the LCM, however, children are generally accompanied by a parent or caregiver, putting less of the responsibility directly on me and allowing me to step away to recharge when I need to. Helping with these programs also gave me a lot of insight into how the activities are planned and set up, and key factors such as making sure they are engaging, safe, creative, and easy(ish) to clean up.

I took these lessons with me when I started working on developing STEAM activities for the LCM. These activities are put on a few times a week and are generally aimed at older children than the Early Years activities I helped with, though the age range is still broad. I read through several example activities that had been previously run or drafted, ranging from building insulated containers to interacting with exhibit artifacts to gravity painting with coloured water. These activities are designed to provoke curiosity and exploration while also offering opportunities for scientific discovery. Above all, the focus is on the child themself making the discoveries, with the template repeatedly reminding those running the activity to listen for (or suggest) "I wonder…" questions, then encourage kids to figure out the answers on their own. Self-guided learning helps children to internalize the knowledge in a way that makes sense to them and at a pace that best suits them.

At Hannah's encouragement, I came up with five different STEAM activities and have been writing up proposals for them. The subjects of these activities were highly varied: density, magnetism, colour mixing, filters, and cryptography. I came up with multiple possible activities

for each subject, with a focus on trying to make them mostly self-explanatory but also open to being explored in unexpected ways. I asked myself if each activity or material was safe, economical, and easy to find, prepare, maintain, and clean up. For instance, I rejected several ideas for the magnetism proposal, such as iron filings, which can be a cool demonstration but could easily become too scattered and messy to be useful for play or learning; or making a compass out of a needle, which is a fun and practical experiment but might lead to pricked fingers. When I ran into such concerns, I asked myself what materials I could substitute or what alternative activities could provide the same learning. It was a great exercise in creativity, critical analysis, and problem solving. I am quite sure that I have not thought of nearly everything the kids could do with my activities or all the things that could go wrong, but hopefully I have headed off the most urgent problems, and I can always learn from my mistakes.

My time at the LCM gave me a lot of practical skills and experience, but perhaps even more valuable were the new perspectives I learned from them. The LCM's mission statement specifically recognizes children's autonomy, intelligence, and creativity and hands control of their experience and their learning directly to them. The usual power dynamic between adults and children is flipped, with children encouraged to direct their own learning and pursue their own interests and creativity, and adults present not to lead the way to a specific destination but to support the children along the path they create for themselves. Children's inherent curiosity and creativity make them natural learners, and the role of an educator is to nourish that. Understanding the LCM's policies, philosophies, and pedagogies reinforced my existing belief that learning can (and should) be made fun, and it showed me that the inverse is also true, that fun and play are integral parts of how kids learn.

Again, it is obvious in retrospect how similar the two roles I chose for my CEL experiences are, how clear my interests were even when I had yet to recognize them or fully understand what they were. Conscious or unconscious, intentional or accidental, I knew I wanted to learn and to help other people love learning. I knew I wanted to teach but not necessarily as a teacher, knew I wanted to learn but not always as a student. What I did not know was how to turn that into a reality, how to find roles and institutions and careers that fit the criteria I was unaware I had. I was unsure of what I was looking for until it slapped me in the face, until I fell headlong into it. And then I loved it.

Through both of these roles, I really confirmed for myself how much I love sharing knowledge and learning, and how much I want to be a part of helping nurture that love in others. I do not want to just teach information—I want to teach excitement. I want to show that childlike curiosity does not have to be left in childhood. I want to make information more accessible and more engaging for more people. I want to teach that there is no such thing as an uninteresting field and that anyone can learn anything they want to. I want to teach people how to learn, but more than that, I want to teach them to *want* to learn.

Both positions were absolutely wonderful experiences in so many ways, but beyond the skills I developed or the lessons I learned—which were numerous and will of course be detailed in the next paragraphs, but first—they were just fun. I loved getting to share my passion for learning, loved bringing creativity and excitement to every assignment or interaction, loved being surrounded by people who still found joy in discovery. Teaching the Digital Humanities course felt like getting to show off my favourite puzzles and toys. Working with the kids at the LCM reminded me how much creativity and drive we start out with, and how important it is to preserve and nurture that. What I did felt valuable, felt like it made a difference, but I was doing

that simply by doing what I loved. It seems deeply appropriate that learning about the relationship between education and fun should also demonstrate the potential for a relationship between work and fun.

Beyond the sheer joy of the positions, I also gained a lot of valuable experience and developed many useful skills. Teaching the Digital Humanities course gave me useful insights into the teaching process, such as developing lesson plans, organization (both short- and long-term), and finding ways to demonstrate concepts. Running the lesson on CSS helped me develop my presentation skills, both in preparing and delivering the content. Putting together the video taught me about interviewing, filming, and constructing a story from disparate parts. I also gained more familiarity with HTML, CSS, and Adobe Premiere, all of which are highly marketable skills in our digital world.

Working at the LCM, I dramatically increased my experience working with kids, and I learned a lot about how to get the most value out of it and do the most good. The star shows taught me how to add interactive elements to presentations and demonstrated the benefits of increasing the kids' sense of involvement in the learning process. Working on the STEAM proposals, I learned how to plan activities and write pitches, how to weigh factors like prices and safety and setup or cleanup requirements. I also got to peek behind the scenes into the less obvious benefits that the LCM and similar institutions can add to their community, from providing socialization opportunities for kids and parents to providing childcare during school closures, and this understanding of additional points of value can help me to pitch myself to organizations and help me to pitch organizations to funders.

Watching how Hannah developed, prepared, and cleaned up the various activities and how she prioritized different tasks, concerns, and responsibilities was also extremely educational.

She was always very aware that things might not go exactly the way she planned, but she welcomed that uncertainty and that fluidity—"as long as the kids are having fun," was a constant refrain. Likewise, for the inevitable messes that cropped up wherever the kids might go—oatmeal dumped in the water table, paint spilled on the floor, every colour of Play-Doh mixed together—the priority was always the kids' enjoyment and engagement. In the various galleries, the more loose items there were, the more they would be spread around, but these play objects were seeds of creativity and fun for the kids to explore. I spent more time than I care to recall sorting plastic vegetables back into their shelves, and it could feel like a never-ending task, but I quickly learned to remind myself that the goal was not for these spaces to be neat and tidy and presentable—the goal was for them to be *playable*. I was not putting away the vegetables so that things looked nice; I was putting away the vegetables so that the next kids to come along had something to interact with. And every time I carefully sorted out a full cart of vegetables just to watch a child dump the whole lot into a basket ten seconds later—well, I had still done something worthwhile for that kid. I had given them an opportunity for play, for imagination, for exploration—for learning.

My two CEL experiences helped me to see how many opportunities there are for informal educational roles, and to realize how quickly that list is expanding. I could work in a museum or a science centre or as a tutor, and I can see myself being extremely happy and fulfilled in any of those roles. I could also look into broader educational communication opportunities, perhaps with a focus on writing—I remember vividly how as a child I loved poring over magazines like *Highlights* or *OWL*, watching shows like *Mythbusters* or *How It's Made* or *Mayday*, and reading books like the *Magic Tree House* and *Dear America* series. These days, such opportunities are only growing more numerous and accessible, with an ever-expanding reservoir of online

educational content from YouTube channels like *Crash Course* to podcasts like *Sawbones* to blogs like *Therapy101*. The possibilities are bounded only by one's imagination.

In fact, in a sense I have already unintentionally started a similar project, when I founded the Facebook page Stories Cut Short in June of 2016 to honour victims of gun violence in the United States. Started in the wake of the Pulse shooting in Orlando, each day I describe the life of someone who died at the end of a gun—over 1,400 and counting. The statistics can seem dry and unemotional, so I try to learn about these people's lives, their dreams and hobbies and loved ones, to show them as a human being rather than simply a number. Even before I had put into words that I was interested in educational communication, even before I took the Digital Humanities course (much less TA-ed it), I was already trying to tell stories and teach and inspire people to care as much as I do through online content. Again, the parallels and connections seem obvious once I notice them, but I never noticed them for years. It was only once Shelley Ambrose and the CEL program helped me to adjust my perspective on what was possible that I realized I had been gravitating towards educational communication all along.

I still have a lot to figure out with regards to what will come next for me, but for the first time in a long time I feel like I have a direction. I may not know exactly how to get there or precisely what it will look like when I do, but I now know where to start— in fact, I now know that I already *have* started, that I have been instinctively following this path for years. My CEL experiences helped me to put what I wanted into words, helped show me that I was heading in the right direction, helped prepare me to pursue my goals in earnest. Now, instead of aimlessly meandering towards an unidentified destination, I can name it, and I can walk towards it with purpose, determination, and confidence. I know what I want. I know it's out there. And I know I can do it.