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Fall 12-11-2020

## Experiential Learning Final Report: Forest City Film Festival and SASAH Internships

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Friday, December 11, 2020

Experiential Learning Final Report: Forest City Film Festival and SASAH Internships

Throughout the tail end of the summer and the first few months of the 2020-2021 school year, I had the opportunity to work on two different internships through the SASAH Experiential Learning Course. The first internship was the position of Western's Summer Student Teaching Support Intern, which I was offered unexpectedly. At the time, I had been aimlessly spending my summer due to self-isolation regulations and had been trying to occupy my time with small projects of my own. Needless to say, I was excited to take on this opportunity, and I thought it would also be good for me to start preparing myself for the upcoming school year, along with its many unprecedented changes. My main role in this internship was to help faculty members set up their online courses for the 2020-2021 school year. I got to work with two professors in the Arts and Humanities faculty and was able to help them build their OWL sites.

The second internship was with Forest City Film Festival, where I worked as a Marketing Communications Intern. This role was also unplanned but rewarding. Earlier this year, I had been anticipating an internship at Toronto International Film Festival. As someone who has always loved films immensely and has been fascinated with the filmmaking process, I wanted to dip my toes in the film industry to see whether this was something I could delve into further after graduation. My home being in the GTA, I had been hoping to work at TIFF over the summer, but because of the pandemic, that possibility had vanished. Fortunately, I was informed that London's Forest City Film Festival was planning to operate remotely this year, which gave me

an opportunity to intern for a film festival despite the pandemic. My work at FCFF entailed tackling various marketing-related tasks, such as video editing, HTML/CSS editing, etc.

One of the biggest effects of the pandemic was that it changed many people's work environments, including myself. Consequently, I found that it was incredibly difficult to keep track of time when I spent so much of it in the same space (i.e., at my desk in my bedroom). As the weeks and months blurred together and zipped past me, I realized that without the SASAH Experiential Learning Course framing the progress of these internships, I would have not recognized how much I had been challenged and grown from them. The reflections, reports, and the final presentation prompted me to be introspective about my internships and gain self-awareness in how the experiences had impacted me. Neither of the internships were what I had expected because of the unforeseen circumstance posed by the COVID-19 pandemic but ultimately, both of my internships challenged me to adapt to uncontrollable circumstances, learn to communicate more effectively when working remotely, and reflect on what kind of work I might want to pursue after graduation.

As I wrapped up my Western Summer Student Teaching Support Internship, I reflected on the effects that a global pandemic can have on one's academic/working career. Despite the many challenges that the pandemic presented, I realized that without it, this internship position would not even have opened up and consequently, I would not have gained valuable experience and growth from this position. I was especially excited for this internship because it felt like the perfect chance to apply the skills I had learned from both of my diametrically opposing majors, SASAH and Computer Sciences. During the internship, I assisted Professor Kate Stanley for the months of July, August, and September and assisted Professor Miranda Green-Bartteet for the month of September. Both professors were optimistic and dedicated to ensuring that the ensuing

school year would be a productive, fulfilling, and enriching learning experience for their students, despite the obstacles that the pandemic had created. As a result, I was able to observe what it meant to adapt to work-related situations in addition to learning new skills that came with the position.

My first month of work did not require much tangible work because Kate was in the planning process for her course at the time. Instead of my anticipated work of assisting in the preparation of the online course through OWL, I took on a research assistant's role and helped bounce ideas around regarding the structure of the course, in addition to digitizing her class readings. It was an interesting experience as it pushed me to reflect on the past couple of years of my own university experience to provide feedback that would hopefully help students feel engaged and productive in their class, especially during these unusual circumstances. I reported back as honestly and thoroughly as I could to Kate's questions and the ideas that she had for her upcoming fall class. The main issue revolved around the fact that the course would be taught entirely online, which was a novel experience for Kate. It was something that I lacked experience in as well, especially for a course of this description. I had taken online courses before, but the content was taught almost entirely through asynchronous learning, so I was also at my wit's end when considering how to facilitate organic, necessary conversations. Though at the time, I felt that my work was not substantial, I realized in retrospect that it helped to progress the development of the course and taught me to appreciate how learning could be applied in various ways. For example, even by experiencing the different teaching strategies professors used over the past four years, I had subconsciously been taking note of their approaches and found myself retrieving that information when relaying my responses to Kate's ideas. I suggested an idea that Professor Mary Helen McMurrin had used in my second year SASAH class to Kate (the idea

was that she split the class into two and only have half the class “in class” for either the first or latter half of the class time), which she found helpful to implement within her own class to maximize the efficient use of time for her synchronous classes via Zoom.

In August, my workload started to increase. I attended two CLT consultation workshops, during which several professors from the Arts and Humanities faculty gathered to exchange questions and concerns, discuss various solutions, and learn how to optimally navigate technological platforms for classes, such as Zoom and OWL. The workshops were helpful for me since I would soon be working on Kate’s OWL pages when she sent me her final draft of the course syllabus. I had had no idea how many tools and resources were available on OWL prior to the workshop. Moreover, it was interesting to listen to professors talk about their concerns for the upcoming year and bounce around ideas on how to combat potential problems. From a student perspective, I had never considered how much preparation went into designing an effective course, but with the pandemic creating many barriers, it also forced me to think about how to approach online learning for myself in September. The majority of conversation circled around the issue of encouraging participation and facilitating quality conversations during the class Zoom sessions. A few peripheral concerns were also raised regarding how to split synchronous and asynchronous learning, how much time a student was expected to dedicate to the course, as well as technical learning curves and adapting to this new learning environment. Listening to the professors share their experiences with their previous classes and finding ways to adjust and apply what they had learned as a means to solve some of the unprecedented issues they faced this year emphasized the value of learning from experience.

When Kate sent me her updated syllabus, I went on our shared Dropbox folder and began putting up the course content on her OWL site. It was a novel experience to see OWL from an

instructor's perspective; just as I had heard on the workshop, there were so many more tools I could use to optimize the learning experience for students than I had known/anticipated. Playing around with different set ups and formats for each page was both an interesting and entertaining experience, and I thought about the functions and options I had wished I had in previous years of using OWL as a student. My objective was to convey her lessons clearly and in a way students would find easy to navigate and to create a format that would simplify their means to keep up with their work and progress throughout the term. To do this, I often referred back to my personal student experience with OWL.

Because I assisted Kate throughout the entirety of the internship, I was also able to witness the progress and changes in how she prepared for and conducted her classes. I enjoyed working with Kate because I appreciated her humble attitude and willingness to learn, even despite being my workplace superior. She always listened to my small contributions and genuinely considered my ideas, even implementing some of them into her class, which made me feel heard and useful. It was fulfilling to know that as a fellow student, I was able to bring a student perspective to the preparation of a course in order to help optimize other students' learning experience. Consequently, I felt confident in sharing my thoughts, even if it was constructive criticism or a differing opinion. Nevertheless, communication was still a difficult area to navigate in this internship, as we mostly corresponded over email, and our discussions and threads often became lengthy. This occasionally led to miscommunication or sometimes a message being missed/not delivered and setting back our work pace. When it came to the designing of the OWL site, I found our method of communication to be especially inefficient because there were times I needed her opinion/preference promptly regarding the layout of the OWL template, but emails slowed down the process. We were still able to make it work by

annotating each other's emails with our responses embedded in the previous message to ensure no messages were lost or unanswered. Until this pandemic, I had always taken for granted the ability to work with others face-to-face. Building community in all aspects of life, including work, is an innate to humans, and I truly felt the effects of working alone throughout this period. Despite the challenge the pandemic posed, however, I learned that it is important to adapt to the changing world and work environment and figure out solutions to the problems posed by uncontrollable circumstances.

Since Miranda's classes were not due to start until the winter term, I did not have much to assist her with until September. I emailed her to let her know that I was available to assist her in her course preparations until the end of September, and she replied asking if I could help her set up her OWL site in a similar manner to Kate's. She wanted the students to be able to transition easily since Kate and Miranda were each teaching a component of the same course, and we both agreed that having a similar OWL site would help students to make a smooth transition, at least in the technical sense, since it would allow navigating the site to feel familiar. Though usually this would not be so important, I realized that because of classes being online, familiarity in navigating a course site and subsequently being able to stay on top of lessons and due dates was a huge factor that eased the difficulties of online classes, even synchronous ones. After I set up her OWL site, Miranda asked me whether there were steps she could follow to create the same template for her other class. Because my internship was drawing to an end at that point, I created a short tutorial video with written instructions as a supplement to help her set the site up on her own. In addition, I created Miranda's site after reflecting on the functionality of Kate's published site, editing out the unnecessary components and features with the aim of enhancing the original template that I had worked on previously.

Needless to say, September was the most challenging month of my internship, partly because I was doing work for both Kate and Miranda, and school had begun for myself as well. In addition, I was started my internship with Forest City Film Festival. My plate did feel full, but the fact that school was online (and mostly asynchronously for me) made it even more difficult to manage my time than I had expected. Because I often prioritized the tasks I was given in my internships, school ended up being pushed to the bottom of my to do list each day. However, being a student while assisting professors to organize their courses gave me a fresh perspective about online school and the challenges it posed. Also, I started to understand the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous and asynchronous learning. For instance, after hearing about how Kate's classes were going, I felt that synchronous classes had the advantage of accountability, where the class would be able to meet each week, forcing each member to stay up to date on the course progress. In addition, I realized that synchronous lectures allowed for the development of a class community and at the very least, familiarity of one's classmates.

In August, I began my internship with Forest City Film Festival alongside the ongoing UWO Student Teaching Support Internship. And after two and a half months of marketing and other preparations, the Forest City Film Festival 2020 took place virtually for the first time ever. It was a strange feeling knowing that the event I had been helping to prepare was taking place while also knowing that I could not attend it in person. The lack of tangibility caused me to feel distant from the festival and initially, my work did not seem gratifying because I could not see in effect the fruit of my labor. Moreover, the week of the festival coincided with many of my midterms and assignments, which added to the stress of it all. Through this experience, I learned two main lessons. The first was that being a team player means that I am part of a larger picture, and even if it might not feel as though my work is visibly contributing in the moment, every

team member's effort counts towards reaching the team's goals. The second lesson I learned was that it is especially when life becomes chaotic that I need to take meaningful breaks and take care of myself mentally, physically, and emotionally.

The first two weeks of the internship started off relatively slowly, and my main task was watching of a week's worth of feature films, short films, documentaries, short documentaries, and animations. I expected this to be relatively easy, since watching films of any kind is one of my favourite things to do to wind down after a long day. However, I found myself struggling to manage my time to watch all the required films, especially when the film was not something that particularly piqued my interest. Nevertheless, it was an enjoyable and informative experience to watch films that have significant connections to Southwestern Ontario (or even Canada at large), and after the whole watching process was over, I felt more excited and personally invested in the festival. On top of watching the films, we had weekly meetings with all the interns, where we would share our thoughts and reactions to the films we had watched for that week and discuss its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its marketability. This weekly conversation was quite daunting and challenging for me. By default, my brain wanted to converse about the analyses of the films' themes or dissecting the aesthetics of the films. However, these topics often had little to do with the actual marketability of the films, and to shift my brain to thinking about the films from the angle of maximizing the audience numbers was a difficult transition to make. Moreover, I felt that I lacked knowledge and experience in the marketing department, and I was uncertain about the effectiveness of my input (everyone was required to share an idea/opinion). However, through these uncomfortable conversations, I began to learn more about how to successfully market films and picked up on the specific strategies my fellow interns used to think about the film from a marketing standpoint. For instance, rather than focusing on the content of

the film, they would think outside of the film itself. Who would be an ideal audience? Were there people on the filming crew that had connections to Southwestern Ontario? Who would benefit from seeing this film? All of these were questions I had never thought about when watching the films initially, but slowly began to incorporate into the viewing process over the course of the month.

As the weeks went by and the festival date approached, my workload increased exponentially. Something that now seems quite obvious that had not occurred to me then was how in advance one must prepare marketing material for events (or for any product, I suppose). My tasks included editing trailers for the films by attaching the FCFF stinger to every trailer that was submitted for the festival, managing the FCFF YouTube channel, and creating GIFs from the films for the social media team to use. My supervisor Nandita also gave me a heads up for upcoming tasks, namely fine-tuning and editing the website's information to ensure everything was up to date and correctly displayed when the website update for FCFF 2020 launched on September 17. Editing trailers and creating the thumbnails for the trailers were the most time-consuming tasks by far. It involved scrutiny towards maintaining a constant volume throughout every video and verifying that the thumbnail was legible and aesthetically appealing. There is a lot of intentionality that goes into creating the perfect thumbnail that will optimize the number of views on a YouTube video, such as choosing the right moment from the film to use as the thumbnail image, creating a simple but eye-catching design, ensuring that the font is large and clear enough to be visible on a small mobile device, and checking that YouTube's timestamps or playlist boxes would not cover up any significant written portion of the thumbnail. As for maintaining the YouTube channel, I researched channels run by other famous film festivals for

inspiration and reorganized playlists in order to highlight the best aspects of FCFF's annual festivals.

Besides logistical challenges that could be overcome through learning new skills and problem solving, I realized there were also several obstacles that were brought on by uncontrollable circumstances. For example, it was difficult working as a team when the pandemic inevitably forced us to work apart from one another physically. Again, communication was difficult and delayed, work culture was lacking, and I found this to affect my work efficiency, especially as someone who mostly worked alone on projects rather than within a team setting. Zoom meetings were not something I looked forward to because of the inefficiency, as well as the awkwardness caused by Internet break-outs and silences while waiting for someone to get the conversations rolling. However, none of these things were within my control to fix; I could only attempt to make the best of the existing circumstances. These conditions made me feel more grateful towards the team members who, despite likely experiencing the same discomfort, were very cooperative during team meetings.

September was a drastic change from August. As the festival (Oct. 17-25) drew nearer, the internship began to feel more hectic as urgent preparations needed to take place for the team to have fully and successfully promoted the festival. Fortunately, despite the busyness, this time was also a time of sharpening old skills and developing new skills, thanks to the two major tasks I tackled. The first task was making a trailer compilation video that Forest City Film Festival aired as a promotional feature at the end of a live presentation that took place mid-September. I was tasked with putting this video together on short notice, which forced me to be efficient in creating it. I had learned how to use Adobe Premiere earlier this year as a hobby when the sudden lockdown from COVID-19 kept me at home feeling unproductive. Because of this

project, I was given the opportunity to apply what I had learned during that time (plus editing the trailers from earlier in the internship) and delve even deeper into educating myself with the variety of functions that Premiere had to offer. Using free online resources as a guide, I learned how to create a seamless compilation video of all the trailers I had edited to date and even inserted animated transition clips that organized the structure of the video into sections based on the type of film (e.g., feature films, short films, feature documentaries, animations, etc.). I also created graphic slides that provided information regarding the films' premiere dates. Upon completing the task, I felt much more comfortable navigating the software and felt challenged to take on even bigger and more complex projects in the future.

The second assignment I received was to edit the HTML/CSS code for the newly launched FCFF website update. Not only did it showcase a newer interface, but it also presented the most up-to-date information regarding the Festival 2020. The most urgent part of the job was to update all the trailer links that had been put up yet so that it would take the user to the FCFF version of the trailer on the FCFF YouTube channel. This would also hopefully increase traffic on the YouTube channel, but its main purpose was to create a cohesive experience for the user when watching the trailers for this year's selection of films from the website. In addition, I was to edit whatever mistakes or errors I found regarding the information for the festival, the films, and the premiere times. Admittedly, I had not used HTML/CSS in a while, so I had to review basic commands and structures before I proceeded with the task. Furthermore, I realized that the website had been built by writing a huge chunk of code to represent each page of the site, which made it considerably difficult to navigate the pages and find the specific location of code where I needed to make the edits. Besides actually changing the code, I had to familiarize myself with how the team of developers who had built this site had structured it in order to change the correct

bits of information and avoid accidentally tampering with and consequently ruining the site. Once the proper lines of code were edited, I had to troubleshoot the errors, if any, that arose. This also took some problem-solving, as I had not built the original code myself and was not always sure of the source of the error. Lastly, I was asked to write some code to create external link buttons for the films that had not yet been assigned a trailer. I learned to do this by looking for the lines of code that the developers had already used to create similar buttons on other films. More than getting to review and use my skill in HTML and CSS, I was intrigued to see how others formatted their code when building a website and got to experience firsthand how to fine-tune such websites.

When October rolled around, I felt as though I could handle anything that came my way. Despite juggling many commitments, I was still somehow managing school well, and I felt that the marketing preparations for the festival were making significant progress. However, two weeks later, I found myself struggling to balance all my responsibilities and feeling overwhelmed by everything I needed to get done within a short span of time. Reflecting now on how things spiralled out of control so quickly, I realized that I underestimated the level of commitment that was expected of me during the festival and regretted not allowing myself to take a break every now and then.

My main tasks at the start of October leading up to the festival mostly consisted of creating various video montages that were going to be used for the festival, proofing the website pages, and continuing to add missing trailer links on the website. They were time-consuming tasks, but I enjoyed doing them as it was a break from school, and I enjoyed the challenge of learning new skills and sharpening old ones. I was becoming very familiar with Adobe Premiere at this point and could edit videos much more efficiently than before. I was also learning how to

add more complex features on websites, such as buttons, using HTML/CSS. Overall, I felt good about the contributions I was making and felt in control of and confident about my workflow.

Once the festival began, I expected my main responsibilities to entail helping out with smaller tasks in order to fill “gaps” in the festival, such as attending the Q&As to get discussions rolling and assisting festival attendees navigate the festival. I thought that through these tasks, I would be able to participate in the festival and to see the impact of our work. I was especially excited for this because I had been working individually for a long time and was not always aware of what the other teams had been working on concurrently. However, my expectations were shattered when I realized that I had a lot more on my plate to complete than I had anticipated during festival period. I was assigned tasks on short notice that were time consuming and necessary for the festival. Coupled with schoolwork, I could not find the time to attend the festival and help out directly in the programs. My tasks during the festival consisted of creating pieces that were necessary for a smooth presentation of the anticipated awards ceremony. Specifically, I created video montages of all the films in competition by category, which would be shown at the awards ceremony before the winner of the category was announced. I also created title cards for every film with their category and sponsor, as well as winner cards for the category winners. In retrospect, I think the workload was more manageable than I made it out to be, but it felt a lot heavier at the time because of the added pressure of midterms. I felt that I could not afford to take a break because I would fall behind in my work and not only set myself back but also let down the FCFF team members who were waiting for me to send these files over.

Moreover, these tasks all required consistent and clear communication, which was difficult to maintain because both Nandita and I were on chaotic schedules. On one occasion, my

email failed to send the attachments I had sent her, which resulted in a minor panic session as the title card files were urgent for the festival. By the time the festival was drawing to an end, I had missed it entirely and was feeling burnt out. Looking back, I can clearly see that I should have asked for help when I needed it, instead of trying to take everything on myself. Because I had been working on my own for most of the internship, I felt that I had to finish whatever was assigned to me by myself, and I was reluctant to ask for help because I was not used to asking for it. I realized that asking for help is not a sign of weakness or failure but rather of strong teamwork and self-awareness, which then enables me to be more productive in the long run. Furthermore, I should have taken breaks when needed and rested periodically. It would have made the experience less stressful and probably resulted in a higher quality of work.

During my last official call with Nandita, I was assigned two final tasks: one, creating Q&A clips from the festival's Q&A sessions and two, an optional task of creating one last promotional video. The latter was a project she said I could take my time with, exercising my own creative control and decisions. Having learned that it is okay to be flexible and ask for help, I felt a lot more at ease taking on this project. When I finally finished the video, I was very pleased with the final product, especially since it was a reflection of how much I had developed my editing skills.

Working at a film festival was an amazing experience that I was not expecting to have this year. It gave me a peek at how this area of the film industry worked – that is, how smaller, less known filmmakers were given a chance to showcase their work and creativity through these festivals, while at the same time, giving the local audience an opportunity to watch great films and show their support for these local filmmakers. Besides gaining marketing experience and learning about the various strategies and ideas that can be used for marketing purposes, I also

learned about what it means to work in a team remotely, to work effectively as an individual, to juggle various responsibilities, and the importance of good communication in the workplace. Additionally, I was challenged in a variety of ways, from learning to use a software I barely knew (Adobe Premiere) to learning to manage my time efficiently. I also realized the great amount of work that goes into preparing for a two-week event, and it made me appreciate all the effort that is put into the planning process. Therefore, even though I did not get to see the final product (i.e., the festival), I realized that the more important thing is to enjoy the process and find satisfaction in that instead of the final product, especially considering the fact that even though I cannot always control the outcome, I can control the work process.

As I prepared for my final presentation regarding my two internship experiences, I realized that both of my internships had given me a variety of skills that I could apply to my next work opportunity. There was a lot I wanted to share, but because I had to keep it concise and within the time limit, I was prompted to reflect more deeply about my experiences and organize the diverse lessons and skills I had learned into overarching, main points that I could convey. After gathering a few significant learning points, I wanted to create a visual that would accompany my narrative without distracting the attendees from the main content. Therefore, I created a presentation that was visually captivating, but with a few main bullet points written so that it clearly defined my talking points, while simultaneously encouraging the attendees to listen to my verbal elaboration of these points.

The presentation preparation also helped me to see how my learning from my internships had translated into my current endeavours. For instance, my UWO internship helped me to develop strategies to enhance user experience through the challenge of optimizing a student's experience on an OWL site. This skill was very helpful in my designer position for a software

development project I signed up for a couple of months ago, as it helped me to frame problems from a user's perspective and think of designs that would optimize the user's experience on a platform. My FCFE Internship allowed me to develop video editing skills, an eye for graphic design from a marketing point of view, and the ability to think creatively about engaging an audience, which has been helpful in my current work study position as a content creator for Western's Student Experience blog, Thrive Online.

Even though my internship processes were different than I had imagined due to the pandemic, I could not have asked for a better experience in the end. I was challenged to overcome an array of obstacles and through that process, I learned a lot more than I had expected. Learning within the confines of a classroom has its own benefit and gain, but I realized that learning through experience leads to a much more applicable and tangible outcome. Moreover, it led to a development of skills that could only come from experience, such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, self-learning, and learning from others, to name a few. I would recommend any student to pursue an internship for a semester or two to get hands-on experience in a work environment because it helped me to prepare myself for a career after graduation. Not only have I gained important skills for the workplace, but I have also been pushed to think about what fields I might want to pursue in the future and reflect based on real work experience. I was fortunate to have had internship opportunities where I could apply both of the majors that I am studying, and though the internships were very different in nature, I came to the same conclusion through both: to pursue a career where I could work on the technical aspects within an art-related field. As technology continues to expand and infiltrate different industries, every company needs someone to work on the technological end of their business. However, I would still like to work within an industry that involves the arts, and these

internships have prompted me to think about what jobs might fill this description. In addition to having these internship opportunities, sharing about my experience and listening to my peers share their own experiences helped me to see that everyone faces challenges and use their unique strengths to overcome workplace challenges. And through these experiences, we continue to improve various facets of ourselves so that we can learn from our mistakes, overcome obstacles, adapt to the ever-evolving world around us, and continuously do better with each new opportunity.