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Reflecting on My Adventures in Experiential Learning

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Experiential Learning Final Report

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Reflecting on My Adventures in Experiential Learning

Abstract

This report analyzes and reflects on my experiential learning experiences with the Forest City Film Festival and Western Libraries. I look back at my initial feelings of bewilderment and imposter syndrome, and then track my progress as I'm pushed out of my comfort zone and learn the skills I need to excel. My time with the Forest City Film Festival and Western Libraries, as well as my peers' testimonies, taught me that at SASAH, we all have the skills needed to succeed in our fields — and the experiential learning program is an excellent place to nurture them.

Keywords: Experiential learning, internships, media, journalism, marketing, communications, culture industries, labour, film, writing.

Introduction

In the summer of 2019, after two years of my undergraduate degree, I had no experience in my field of study, nor any concrete idea what to pursue after graduation. A little over a year later, after two adventures in experiential learning, I had experience in various areas of work — and most importantly, some idea of where I saw myself fitting into the landscape of the media and cultural industry. Each adventure in experiential learning gave me experiences and skills I'd use to apply and succeed in my next position — I could see how each experience built on the last and how this has helped me in different positions. And so, what follows is a report of my

internships at the Forest City Film Festival and Western Libraries, as well as my reflections on these experiences.

The Forest City Film Festival

On a sunny afternoon in August 2019, I sat in a meeting room in an office high above downtown London. Through the large office windows, I could see London sprawled out below — a landscape punctuated by the city’s signature thickets. In the centre of the room was a large mahogany table, around which the members of the Forest City Film Festival’s marketing team sat. And then there was me. This was the first day of my first internship, and I was overwhelmed — that’s putting it mildly.

When I applied to this position — on a whim and much past the deadline — my expectations were non-existent. I had never worked a job remotely related to my field of study, and I had no idea what to expect. But after I received an offer and spoke with my supervisor Nandita in July, I had a rough expectation of what my work would include: content creation in the form of blogs, speaking with filmmakers, and helping out during the Festival weekend. Still, when I attended my first meeting with the Festival’s marketing team, anything I had expected was inconsequential.

That first meeting is something that’ll always stay with me: seeing my future co-workers gathered around a large mahogany table to talk about marketing strategies was not something I had expected to happen so quickly. I had expected a more gradual approach, but the work’s fast pace was a useful learning style. It forced me to adapt — and quickly. There was no time for introductions or settling in — this may have been my first meeting, but I had to contribute. Fortunately, my brisk introduction to the world of experiential learning and marketing helped me learn a valuable lesson: while university may not explicitly replicate workplace settings or

activities, it still gave me the knowledge I needed to succeed. After two years in an undergraduate program, I had the skills I needed; it was just a matter of application.

My first marketing task solidified this belief in my own skills. I had to write a blog about a film — finally, something with which I was familiar. My task was to sell the film in these blogs, convince people to buy tickets, and the word count was strict; these were not for academic audiences. I'd spent the past two years writing a certain way, but I quickly realized that the style I used in university wasn't one most people wanted to read. I had to adapt. Fortunately, I had extensive writing practice, and the transition wasn't difficult. Moreover, my supervisor Nandita's feedback on these blogs showed me that the skills I have developed in SASAH and other courses — so-called “soft skills” — were not just applicable, but supremely useful. My internship highlighted the benefit of SASAH's expansive curriculum. It enabled me to draw from a wide variety of disciplines. For example, when writing about these films, I drew from the principles of rhetoric learned in a second-year SASAH course about concise communication, and I used analytic skills gleaned from film and literature courses.

The first blog I wrote was a review of a feature-length documentary by a University of British Columbia Professor titled *Illusions of Control*. It's a powerful film about ecological disasters, and I wrote about its moving messages and striking mise-en-scene. This was a piece of work about which I felt strongly — and I think it turned out particularly well. For the first time, I was writing on subjects about which I truly cared. Unfortunately, I hadn't yet had the luxury that in my academic experiences. Critically, my work on this blog article showed me the benefits of working on something in which I had a personal interest — it took my writing to another level.

This idea of writing on subjects I cared about is an important one. Before my first internship, I did not see myself in marketing or advertising; I had imagined my work in the

media industry would be closer to journalism — something I saw as a more meaningful career as it would enable me to create content and effect social change. This first blog removed my predisposition against marketing and advertising and showed me that I could still create content on topics about which I cared. Marketing and advertising, as I discovered, did not prevent me from being creative and passionate. I'm grateful that I could dispel this idea; one of the biggest takeaways from my experiences is that it's essential to be open and accept new ideas.

When it came to new accepting new ideas, I also had to grapple with my own assumptions about internships in media and cultural industries. Initially, my perception of internships was moulded by the notions that free labour is dangerous and self-exploitive and that paid internships were achieved through word of mouth — you had to “know a guy.” My first internship, though unpaid, was anything but self-exploitive; the way SASAH sets up its internship program — encouraging and allowing students to earn academic credit — creates meaningful connections between employers and students while providing the student with an opportunity to learn skills outside of the classroom setting.

Some of these new ideas with which I had to grapple were tangible ones. As I edged closer to the actual Festival at the end of October, my tasks changed from content creation and blogs to social media posts. I used software like Hootsuite to schedule the posts while using social media analytics to find out when these posts would attract the most attention. This the type of skill and knowledge that I cannot learn in class and comes only from work experience. For me, this is a crucial part of an internship: developing skills that are applicable to other jobs. SASAH does a fantastic job of developing the soft skills about which I wrote earlier. Still, there are specific hard skills that I believe employers look for, and so the SASAH internship offer the chance to develop these hard skills through their internship program — something that lends

credence to SASAH's educational mandate. Furthermore, an internship helps the intern to bring skills not just to other jobs but to the classroom environment. For example, I had to participate regularly in large meetings about marketing strategies. Unlike in some classes and lectures, keeping quiet and listening was not an option.

My time with the Festival was, of course, my first adventure in experiential learning, and so it regularly pushed me outside my comfort zone. During the festival weekend, I had to host a documentary screening at Imagine Cinemas. The film was about Robbie Robertson and The Band — though I must admit, I had never heard of them before the Festival. It was a popular screening — sold out, in fact — and I had to speak in front of approximately a hundred people. It was terrifying, yes, but also an invaluable learning experience. Outside of this internship, I would never have been forced to develop public speaking skills and face my fear of it. As a result, I am more comfortable speaking in front of people, and I hope to leverage this skill into better performances in classroom discussions and seminars.

I have written extensively about the personal value of my placement at the Forest City Film Festival, from learning to skills to overcoming new challenges, and I believe that my experience is a universal one; internships are valuable to all SASAH students and contribute to its interdisciplinary educational mandate. Internships introduce students to a world beyond the classroom, and experiences like those I detailed push students outside of their comfort zones — something valuable in terms of personal and academic growth. The variety of hard and soft skills learned during internship experiences is essential in developing the type of student SASAH strives to do. I saw firsthand the burgeoning link between humanities education and successful careers — STEM or business are not the only paths to take, as my internship proved. And so, SASH should continue to encourage and provide internship opportunities for its students. These

experiences create students that are more likely to be leaders in classroom and workplace settings.

In summation, my internship at the Forest City Film Festival was my first introduction to work that was related to my studies — work that I might do after I graduate. The experiences, I hope, improved my chances of employment in the coming years, but more importantly, they helped me grow as a person and as a student. I see internships are invaluable to successful education and doubly so to SASAH's interdisciplinary students. I cannot understate the importance of this experience.

As a lover of film, I couldn't ask much more of my first internship: my experience at the Forest City Film Festival was an excellent way to apply the skills I've learned in SASAH and MIT to something real, and more importantly, something about which I really cared.



Western Libraries

My internship with Western Libraries was an eight-week affair — four months for a FIMS credit, and four for SASAH. I suppose it's not really fair to include experiences from that first four months in this report, but it's hard for me to look at my experience in two parts — I can't talk about one without the other. It's so difficult to divide because the relationships I built in my first term carried over into this one. My relationship with my supervisor Julie was extremely important in this process. Needless to say, I never felt like a stereotypical intern,

handed down the jobs other people didn't want to do. What I felt like, then, was a valuable member of the team. I know the type of work my supervisor wants, and she knows my strengths and weaknesses. One of the things I'll take away from this experience is that the better the relationships you have with those around you, the easier (and higher quality) your work will be.

This is not to say, though, that everything was easy. My second term with the Libraries started in May, and I struggled with working from home. For example, I interviewed a colleague over Zoom for an article I was writing, and it was an awkward experience. I don't claim to be the best at interviewing people, but it's something I'd done in the past to some success. Of course, I don't fault the colleague I spoke with, but it was an awkward experience. We repeatedly interrupted each other, and there was no flow to the conversation. Over Zoom, it's impossible to read those non-verbal cues that are necessary to a flowing conversation. I remember being nervous that the interrupted nature of the Zoom call would harm my work. Thankfully, that wasn't the case, but it was a new challenge with which I had to grapple.

The other challenge I faced working from home was of my own making — I couldn't blame Zoom or virtual meetings for my troubles staying on task. When I worked in Western Libraries' office in Weldon Library, I was much more productive. There are too many distractions at home I'm unable to ignore. For instance, during a sunny day in May, I found it impossible to sit cooped up inside. At one point, I sat outside on my deck to enjoy the sun while I worked. It wasn't productive. I tried drafting social media copy for the week's upcoming posts, but I could barely see my laptop screen. When I came inside, I noticed I'd made a slew of errors — something unacceptable for social media posts. It's a kind of a silly story, I know, but reflecting on it helped me see where I went wrong.

This strange period of working from home adaptation also helped me realize that I couldn't get too comfortable and rest on my previous experiences. Sure, I may have a great relationship and produced great work in the past, but if I couldn't replicate that in the present, it wouldn't mean much. COVID-19 and the ensuing at-home internship showed me how fast things change and how quickly I might need to adapt. I also couldn't use this situation as an excuse for not producing my best work. So, while the work itself may not have been different from what I'd done in the past, the path to success was now much different. I was no longer in the office where I could speak to my supervisor at any time; I had to be more self-sufficient, and at first, I struggled.

But, as is often the case, I soon adapted. Soon I began to attempt some task outside my comfort zone. For instance, I had the opportunity to work closely with Western Libraries' graphic technician, Rayanne. Now, I am probably the least artistically inclined person ever, but working with her gave me a basic understanding of graphic design. For instance, I learned the best practices for social media images and received a crash course in graphic design software. Of course, for obvious reason, I didn't produce anything of much value to the library, but it was a fantastic introduction to that side of content creation. What's more, my supervisor Julie said many times that she wished she'd expanded her skillset into the graphic areas of content creation.



This advice is something that particularly stuck with me. I've realized that it's almost not enough now to be good at just one thing. Especially in fields like journalism, reporters are now expected almost to do it all: writing, photography, digital media, etc. While I'd never claim to anyone that I'm currently able to do these things, I've realized that I should

expand my skill set to increase my chance of success in any role. It's not a tangible skill, sure, but I think it's a valuable learning experience, and after all, what else are these internships for?

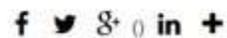


Of course, there were many times I performed tasks that *were* within my skillset. I was often asked to write news articles and press releases for the library's website. These varied from more journalistic articles to communications or 'PR' pieces. While the latter isn't the most satisfying to write — for obvious reasons, they're mostly bereft of storytelling, personality, everything *fun*

— I see them as valuable experience for possible future careers. I enjoyed writing the more traditional news articles, though. As vain as it sounds, something is satisfying about seeing your name on a news article on a big organization's website. I can't say enough how much I appreciated the opportunity to work on a lot of these stories. I was able to interview interesting people doing fascinating work and then tell their stories. I wrote a piece about hidden local histories in Southwestern Ontario that I enjoyed, as well as stories on Loyalists' migrations in North America and the John Davis Barnett Legacy Collection. The latter two were, admittedly,

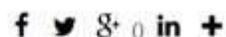
Digital mapping uncovers hidden histories

SEPTEMBER 15, 2020 BY WILL SHARPE, SPECIAL TO WESTERN NEWS



'Loyalist' project teams up to map history

APRIL 17, 2020 BY WILL SHARPE



from my first term with the library, but they're important enough to include. I realize the audience for these is probably pretty small, but for me, that was never really the point. It helped me realize that journalism is something I want to do, despite all the challenges that come with it.

I also learned some valuable lessons — the kind you can't glean from any university course. In short, this internship was my first time working in an office for a big organization. This isn't to say office work is an inherently bad experience, but the intricacies and politics of a big organization were eye-opening. I experienced with some articles the many, many layers of vetting a piece goes through before we could publish it. I remember I sent an article off in late May, and then in July received an email detailing the changes that various people suggested. At that point, I'd basically forgotten about the piece, and by the time I'd made the changes, it wasn't really my article anymore. I don't mean to criticize this process; I understand the necessity. For better or worse, that's the way things are, and it was an invaluable lesson.

Critically, one of these 'PR' articles presented one of the greatest challenges of my experiential learning experience. In late May, I was assigned to help write an article about Western Libraries' Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Statement. Western's EDI Subcommittee had drafted a statement outlining the library's commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity. I drafted an initial article — a press release-style piece with the statement itself and some quotes from the individuals involved. We were set to release the statement when the world erupted in protest of systemic oppression. Suddenly, our statement looked reactionary — a token release, almost. Here I experienced firsthand the struggles of communications and public relations. I had to redraft the article and make it clear this was something we'd worked on before the recent protests. I also now had the challenge of making it seem less like a corporate statement and more human, more "in touch" with the current climate. For me, this was exceedingly difficult — I

found the balance between sounding human and still relaying our message near-impossible. I can say for certain, though, that should I work in communications in the future, this experience is one I'll lean on.

While I've written extensively about the personal value of my placement at Western Libraries, I believe my experience is a relatable one; internships are valuable to all students — SASAH or otherwise. Internships introduce students to a world beyond the classroom, and here at SASAH, contribute to our interdisciplinary educational mandate. Beyond the variety of hard and soft skills learned, I've seen the importance of learning intangible lessons about relationships and workplace culture.

These things that to my mind, no course can replicate, and so it's critical that SASAH prepares its students to navigate these things. And so, SASH should

Annual Report SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS, PREPARED CITIZENS



Will Sharpe, Marketing and Communications Intern

I spent eight months as a marketing and communications intern with Western Libraries, and I couldn't imagine a better learning experience. I benefited from a behind-the-scenes look at the library system and I've come to appreciate it as a truly special place.

My tasks focused on drafting copy and assisting in the production of graphics for social media and other communications. I completed several projects that I'm very proud of, including news articles about the Barnett Legacy Digitization Project and Loyalist Migration Project – the latter of which was published by Western News.

Almost all of my projects at Western Libraries spanned departments, and I owe much of my experience to the wonderful people that work there. My colleagues pushed me to take on projects outside of my comfort zone, and they helped me feel like a valuable addition to the team.

continue to encourage and provide internship opportunities for its students as the experiences create students that are more likely to be successful in workplace settings.

In summation, my internship at Western Libraries was my first introduction to work at a large organization and the pressures that come with that. I know these experiences will improve my chances of employment in the coming years, beyond being merely lines on a resume. To me, internships are an invaluable part of meaningful education, and I'm thankful for SASAH's encouraging approach to them. I couldn't have asked for a better learning experience than an

internship with Western Libraries. My tasks included writing articles, press releases, and social media copy. I experienced a great variety of work, and my colleagues Julie and Rayanne supported me in trying new things and developing my already-existing skills. I've greatly improved my skills with different forms of writing, and I genuinely felt like a valuable addition to Western Libraries' team. These are skills and experiences that'll stay with me for a long time.

Creating and Presenting the Visual Report

As I mentioned in the analysis of my time with the Forest City Film Festival, public speaking has never been one of my strong suits. And while I wasn't thrilled about speaking in front of people again, I knew I had that experience to draw from. As it turned out, I wouldn't need it: the experiential learning event was an enjoyable, relaxed, and informative affair. The attendants were engaged and supportive, and even with the added challenge of presenting over Zoom, the event was flawless.

I tried to create an engaging presentation that related my experiences in an honest and relatable manner. I discussed many of the items found in this report — my initial struggles with writing, my work with social media, and my experimentation with graphic design — and elaborated with images. I didn't want it to be a dry retelling of my tasks — I wanted to relate my feelings and experiences, as well as the lessons I learned. I hope I was successful.

The highlight of the experiential learning event was, of course, hearing about the experiences of my peers. While I did not doubt the skill and capacity of my peers, the variety of their experiences was astounding. I could see how each person's experiential learning experience reflected their strengths and personality — a real testament to the strength of SASAH's experiential learning program. It was also refreshing to see that people often had the same

worries I did; we were all, but as people spoke about their experiences, it was clear that well all belonged and excelled at our experiential learning experiences.

Conclusion

And so, my adventures in experiential learning taught me that every experience matter. A little over a year ago, I had no experience in marketing, communications, or journalism. Now, I'm confident in my abilities in each. Each experience I had built on the next — it's a process. I witnessed firsthand how my work with the Forest City Film Festival helped me secure a position with Western Libraries, and how my position at the library enabled me to land a summer job in communications at Bruce Power. That job did, unfortunately, fall through due to the pandemic, but luckily, I was contacted by the Festival about a paid summer position with them — one I would not have been fit for without my work at the library. I also used some of the pieces I produced for the library as writing samples when applying for my current position at the *Western Gazette* — another example of how I've benefited from these experiential learning experiences.

But my intention here is not to paint myself in an impressive light; rather, I want to use my experience as an example that one can begin with no experiences in a field and quickly gain lots. I struggled a lot with imposter syndrome — I often felt like I didn't belong or that I didn't have the skills for a position. I've learned this isn't the case — for anyone. We all have the skills to succeed, and I believe that SASAH's experiential learning program does a fantastic job nurturing them.