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Experiential Learning Final Report: Instructional Technology Resource Centre

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SASAH Experiential Learning

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Experiential Learning Final Report: Instructional Technology Resource Centre

"Who am I?" This is the question I have asked myself consistently throughout my four years of undergrad. As a soon-to-be graduate, I wonder about the kind of person I am in this world. What is my style, voice, and presence? What are my values, passions, and talents? The thought of entering the adult world sends me into a spiral of questioning myself and my actions: am I pursuing the right job, class, or extracurriculars? With a large school like Western University, it feels impossible to find skills within me that stand out from the large auditorium filled with first-year students during orientation week. At the beginning of my undergrad experience, all I knew was that I was an artist and needed to do something to feed my creative desires. It was not until my experiential-learning credit in my final year that I experienced a deep understanding of myself and where I fit in my community. Through a series of challenges and opportunities, I gained a deep understanding of myself, my values, passions, and talents. And now, as I prepare to graduate, I am eager to share my journey with others and continue this path of self-discovery.

As a Digital Media Designer, at The Instructional Technology Resource Centre (ITRC), I am responsible for several different tasks and projects, from minor on-call tasks to large-scale course projects. My supervisors assign students tickets (the ITRC term for projects and tasks), using Jira software that shows when a student completes a task, almost like a video game – you start with easy tickets, and they get harder over time. For example, the first week of work had several small tickets such as completing training modules, practicing setting up and taking down

of the studio and learning the theory that goes into creating digital media and online learning content. Once I completed my training, I moved on to minor tickets or “busy work”; this includes uploading CSS templates to new OWL websites, watching lecture videos, sifting through the auto-generated captions to make sure there are no spelling errors and then uploading them to OWL websites. As I got more comfortable using OWL, I also started completing support appointments, where I work one-on-one with a professor troubleshooting any issues and

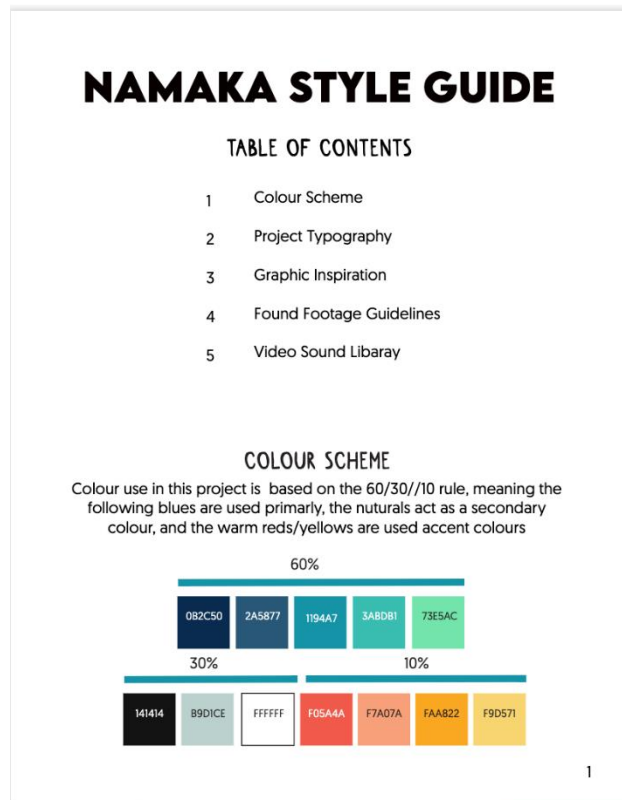


Figure 1 Namaka Style Guide, pdf file, 2021

explaining how certain OWL tools work. After all this miscellaneous work, I was thrilled when I received my first project: Studio Art 1601. This was Professor Tricia Johnson's course - which funny enough, I had recently completed at the time. The main mission was to convert all of Tricia's in-person studio art courses to online and to ensure this class was accessible and fun for our recently quarantined first-year art students. Later, I was assigned to the Biology Storyline project, where I had to design and recreate graphics for a pipette lab and a cell lab simulation. This bio-lab storyline simulation project gave me complete creative control over the design and birthed my reputation as the “*Office Picasso*.” Following the storyline projects, I was put on a bigger project called *Namaka* – I had tasks such as creating a style guide (Figure 1) for the entire project, creating graphics, animating lecture videos, and formatting the OWL site with Cascading Style Sheets

(CSS). From 5 min tasks to 2-year-long projects, I have created, assisted, and closed many tickets throughout my time at the ITRC.

However, there is more to this position than an assembly line of tasks that feel like a video game. Reflecting on my experiences in this position, I realize that I have walked away with technical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills. Over the past eight months, my relationships with co-workers and supervisors have grown, helping us share knowledge faster than ever. Using the reflection methodology, I have gained a deeper understanding of myself by learning my values, strengths, and weaknesses. As a Visual Arts and SASAH student, I have become an asset to the ITRC community, and I believe that this position is perfect for fellow SASAH students to get involved in. My position as a Student Digital Media Designer has shaped my understanding of myself more than any of my four undergrad years.

When I think back to when I first applied for this job, I was not expecting to walk away from it with a vast understanding of technology. From the title and job description, I thought I would be working solely in graphic design, getting professional experience from doing what I already knew. There was much more than that. I learned everything from technical design to computer programming to video production. Within months, I learned how to code CSS and HTML, build OWL sites for professors, use professional video production equipment including lights, audio, and cameras, and animate a series of lecture videos ranging from three to forty minutes. Now, I practically know the periodic table of Adobe Creative Cloud products. Since developing these skills, I have enriched various aspects of my life outside the ITRC by applying my technical skills to extracurricular marketing and communications, creative class projects, and community group projects. Rather than sticking to the artist role in team projects, I am more likely to take on

video editing, audio editing, video production, animation, and web design roles because I feel more confident and comfortable doing them from my job experience.

Beyond technical skills, I gained many workplace and interpersonal skills, such as accountability, time management, leadership, adaptability, punctuality, patience, teamwork, and initiative. These skills were obtained by teaching others how to use technology, leading team projects, and learning from others to develop my professionalism. Receiving insight into the instructor's expectations and goals for a course, I understood how to organize content for the class based on its delivery type and envisioned the students' preferences while navigating this course. My work has helped me develop best practices for creating project plans and style guides, helping me better envision projects for school or my practice as an artist. While it was challenging to complete tasks with short deadlines while balancing outside endeavours, this experience positively reshaped my time-management skills to teach me that solutions are found with an open mind and that sacrifice, and prioritization often help complete project goals. The best part of all these skills is their transferability to my future, where I expect to achieve higher seniority positions at different organizations, balancing work, personal, and family life, and making careful career decisions. Acquiring these skills has not only shifted my career goals but my perspective on life.

For a part-time position, where everyone has different schedules, I was also surprised to have built close bonds with fellow designers and supervisors. The ITRC community takes pride in ensuring students feel welcomed and encourages conversations to happen naturally while at work. Our supervisors provide a good balance of challenging us to grow but preventing us from entering pressured situations to complete tasks, by giving us plenty of time and feedback when completing tasks. The team focuses on inclusivity whenever possible, whether that is inviting everyone to have



Figure 2 Members of Team Namaka, February 2023

lunch together outside on a nice day, asking if anyone wants to take a break from their computer to go for a walk down the hall to fill up their water bottle, or asking if others would like to

play a game of cards during their lunch break. Through this experience, I have realized the importance of these small gestures because, if repeated, they become a common courtesy in the workplace. As a result of great team relationships, fellow designers and supervisors are more engaged in group projects, because we share a base level of respect and friendship for one another.

Not only has my experience at the ITRC been fulfilling, but the required assignments of the SASAH Experiential Learning credit have instilled the process of reflection and goal setting helping me build a better sense of myself. After completing the Clifton Strengths assessment, I was surprised by my results: Adaptability, Strategic, Achiever, Positivity, and Empathy. Looking at the list of thirty-four strengths, I thought I would have Learner or Ideation since I identify most with these strengths relative to others. After reading the signature themes report, however, I identified strongly with most explanations. The Action Planning Guide provided me with ten ideas for action for each of my top five strengths and prompted me to pursue these ideas for action while at the ITRC.

Surprisingly, adaptability was one of the weaknesses I noted in my previous reflections. For example, while I have improved my understanding of equipment, I had moments when I felt awkward asking how to operate equipment in the studio and avoided asking something because I was anxious that my co-workers would think little of me. Reflecting on this experience, I allowed my natural adaptability to shine through at work by asking questions, researching answers, and trusting my judgment. When I recorded class presentations on my own, I made the mistake of plugging in an audio cord in the wrong spot and desperately called my co-worker to help. Adaptability is not getting lost in the void of fear, doubt or embarrassment but rather reframing my mindset to focus on finding a solution to the presented problem.

While working in media is a creative and ever-changing space, some elements of the ITRC are repetitive, such as uploading CSS templates or captioning videos. Walking into the office at the same time every day to do the same tasks also can feel like the movie *Groundhog Day*. I cannot always rely on change, rather I have to make it happen myself. This includes working on creative projects like skill builders, eating lunch outside on a nice day, or chatting with someone in the office for a bit. I learned that the ability to adapt also means that I lose interest in mundane activities. To improve my weakness, I have strived to find creativity in my position and make the minute tasks fun and exciting, for example turning my audio skill-building exercises into a podcast that I use outside of work. Knowing that my top trait is my adaptability, I should further cultivate my "reputation as a calm and reassuring person when others become upset by daily events and avoid roles that demand structure and predictability" (Gallup). Based on my adaptability, I was relieved to know that my career path should be a responsive one, such as journalism, television production, and emergency healthcare since those are industries that I am currently drawn to and want to pursue.

Throughout my reflections and work, I naturally strategize. People at my work often give me the task of storyboarding or creating a style guide because I know how to search through the vast selection of resources on the internet for the perfect fonts, colours, graphics, sounds, and effects that best match the concept of the project. My ability to strategize, as the Clifton Strength assessment puts it, “allows me to sort through the clutter and find the best route” which I now realize is something unique in the workplace (Clifton). In my reflections, I was able to spot the repercussions of my actions more clearly and select the best choice of action. Having the strength to strategize also means having the weakness of not seeing all the details. I like to move fast, but it has resulted in errors, spelling mistakes, and glitches; therefore, I need to take the time to thoroughly reflect or muse about a goal that I want to achieve. I need to take advantage of this ability by planning my range of responses in detail. Strategizing also means that it may be more difficult to work in group settings where different approaches clash. For example, when working with a teammate who had a different vision of a video project, I found it hard to let go of my ideas. Rather than getting frustrated, I tried to make myself known for the resources and become a consultant for those stumped by a particular problem or obstacle. In a way, stepping down from leadership positions was also a strategy, as it allowed me to be more helpful and approachable in team situations. I’m grateful to know that “by naturally seeing a way when others are convinced there is no way, you will lead them to success” (Gallup).

While it is nearly impossible to pick a time when I did not enjoy working at the ITRC, I would say that *Namaka* was the most challenging project. Having four instructors with varying ideas for their course made it difficult to realize each of their visions. It was frustrating having to change long animation videos several times to match the instructor’s vision, which I had known



Figure 3, Namaka Team Re-cap poster, September 2022

very little about. To bring the artist's drawings to life, I spent hours tediously layering their drawings into sections so that they could be animated in the lecture videos. The best part of my experience, however, occurred at the end when I got to present on behalf of my team the *Namaka* project to the rest of the ITRC. When my supervisor asked me to create a project summary (Figure 3) and present them along with other ITRC projects, I felt honoured and excited to be the team representative, because I worked hard on the project, and it turned out amazing. This course has

since flourished outside of Western University, as it has received sponsorships from *E-learning Ontario* and *Coursera*. To my surprise, I also received formal recognition from the Vice-Provost (Academic Programs) for my efforts on this course, and received, alongside my team of instructors, ELT, and student designers, the *Annual Award for Excellence in Collaborative Teaching*. Working on this course has shown me that I have the tools to create engaging artistic content and has inspired me to create my own online course one day. In pursuing a graduate program in the future, I'm inspired to educate future students with digital strategies. Overcoming the challenges of seeing the instructor's vision has also prepared me for future collaborations and commission work where I need to be patient and respectful of clients' intentions for a project.

While I've grown skills through the ITRC, I recognize that my talents as a SASAH student and Visual Arts student have been a great asset to the ITRC community. As a visual arts student with an eye for design and production, I can format projects uniquely and aesthetically. Colour theory and composition design are foundational skills in Visual Arts but seemed like a foreign language to students from different degrees and backgrounds. Drawing illustrations for a biology class storyline allowed my full creativity to emerge and my supervisor was surprised by how fast I could produce the drawings (Figure 4). My ability to work in groups at the ITRC is reflective of my SASAH course experience where most of the projects are group based and involve project planning. SASAH also has taught me about equity and respect in our contemporary world. In the planning meeting for *Namaka*, I suggested that the instructors outsource a local Indigenous artist to create graphics since the content is heavily related to Indigenous ways of learning and teaching. As a white settler, I was concerned with the cultural appropriation associated with creating graphics for this course and my supervisor gave my suggestion to the instructors. They heard my concern, loved my solution to the problem, and commissioned the artist that I suggested. As a result, the graphics became an amazing addition to the project, and I am not sure if it would have been considered if I had not suggested it.

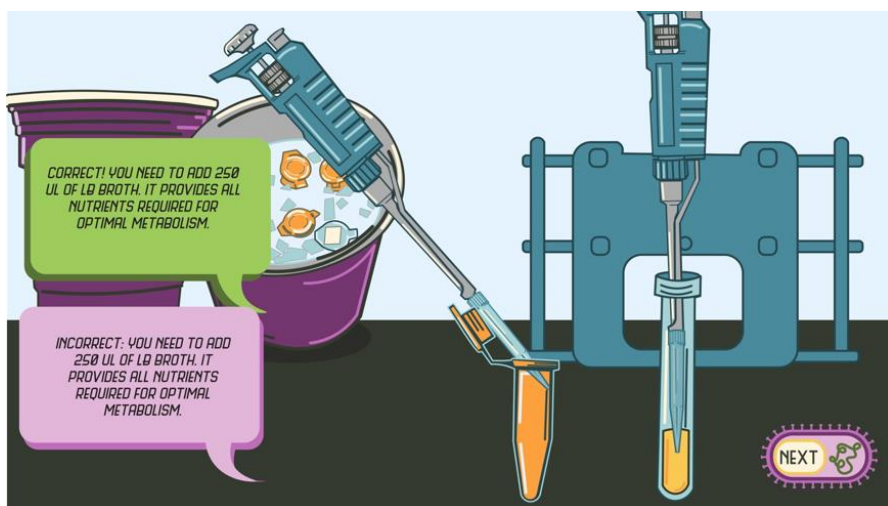


Figure 4, Biology Storyline Lab Graphics, May 2021

Through my experience with the ITRC, my skills have grown exponentially, and I believe it is the perfect opportunity for any fellow SASAH student to take on. The

unique thing about this job is that it is interdisciplinary and like SASAH, student designers come from a large range of majors: we have students from psychology, MIT, computer science, business, and visual arts. The position encompasses four key areas: technical design, communication, teamwork, and creative projects. The technical design side allows for experience in creating professional content. The communication side allows opportunities to engage with instructors to navigate their needs and help them achieve their end goals. The teamwork side provides opportunities to lead and learn how to be productive as a team. Lastly, creative projects give freedom to bring ideas to life with the advanced resources the position provides. Not only does this position have multiple dimensions to it, but it is also the perfect student job, as designers can arrange their shifts and projects around their school schedule. Students are integral to the ITRC because they provide a student perspective for the professor and benefit the other students who may take the course that they work on. Some instructors love our work so much that instructors help provide internships and freelance work for students outside of the ITRC. Other students that I work with had said that the ITRC has changed the trajectory of their careers. My friend, for example, entered the ITRC with the extent to gain computer-science experience but has since uncovered a passion for film and production that has changed his career to focus more on becoming a film director. These are only a few of the several positive outcomes the ITRC has had on students, and I hope SASAH students consider applying in the future.

If had to offer any advice to those future students considering the same placement, I would suggest to them to bring their three P's: be patient, positive, and proactive. Students should not let the office intimidate them: walking into the studio for the first time and seeing all the equipment and technology was intimidating, but with patience and hard work, everything became second

nature. In addition, it is essential to maintain a positive mindset, even on days when the workload seems overwhelming, and try to connect with their work colleagues. Some students at my work go through the back



Figure 5, Audio and Camera Best Practices Video filming, January 2023

door, not saying a word to

anyone else in the office, and they end up not enjoying their time working as much. Starting every shift off with a “hello” to everyone in the office and a small conversation makes people happier and more productive. Research concludes that social interaction and support at work have positive effects on employee well-being and productivity (Lin). Lastly, students should remember to be proactive; it will get noticed and will rub off on others. While at the ITRC, I have established good habits such as leaving spaces the way I found them, cleaning up files on the computer, disinfecting office surfaces, and helping with cleaning tasks whenever possible. While my suggestions are small, they help shift your perspective and allow you to truly thrive in this workplace environment.

From this job, I have become more aware of my workplace environment; how I impact our ITRC community, and how the ITRC impacts the Western Community. Whenever guests enter our space, I ensure that I’m friendly, welcoming, and approachable. Based on my demonstrated work ethic, my workers and supervisors expect me to complete tasks immediately and maintain communication as needed. While I had moments where I failed, I was dependable, demonstrated initiative, cooperated well with others, and displayed enthusiasm. As a result, many instructors

have benefited from my help. Professor Johnson's course was so successful that Western News wrote an article about it (Ferguson). In addition, I have helped build trust and an excellent reputation for the ITRC community. Over the past twenty-five years, ITRC has positively impacted the Western Community. The ITRC demonstrates the importance of technology in course delivery and the benefits of having the student perspective. We also have made education more accessible to students: through captioning videos, ensuring designs pass the colour contrast test, and addressing the multiple ways of learning – visual, auditory, kinesthetic etc. Most of all we have supported faculty and instructors who do not have prior knowledge of the OWL platform or digital media. Overall, while our actions seem small together, they have a positive impact on the ITRC community and the Western University community.

It was bittersweet to create my presentation about the ITRC: I was excited to present my hard work in front of my class, but I was sad to realize that my journey at the ITRC is ending soon. Unlike other projects in my undergrad, I was excited to deliver this presentation because I had a lot of passion for this EL experience, resulting in spending several hours crafting it and practicing it. When selecting the template for the PowerPoint, I spent an hour finding a template that has the ITRC green and purple colours in the colour palette. In addition, I also sifted through my OneDrive to find any documentation of myself or my work from the ITRC to be in the presentation. I rehearsed my presentation several times with a stopwatch, ensuring I could get it in the seven-minute time requirement. I was inspired by previous SASAH EL presentations to include a video element to help explain and show what it is like to work at the ITRC. While the video was only one-minute long, it would have taken me over the time limit, so I took it out of the presentation. Practicing beforehand calmed my nerves and made me deliver my presentation much like any other performance I have done. Presenting to an audience of peers, instructors, and employers

allowed me to be confident and enthusiastic about my experience. While I was not told by the ITRC to convince people to apply for the new positions opening this summer, I knew that the ITRC is hiring new staff, so I ended off by letting everyone know about this available opportunity. Throughout this process, I effectively learned to pitch ITRC to a person who does not have any idea what it is and sell my experience to my audience.

Receiving feedback from my peers, instructors, and employers, also expanded my understanding of self. “Has the ITRC changed the way you approach learning?” Deanna asked. At that moment I had not considered this, but it was an obvious “yes!” The ITRC provided me with this “behind the curtain view” at Western University, seeing the process and planning that goes into creating course content and being the one to transform it to make it more accessible. I see that professors are not the perfect human beings that I imagined, and more are like students, trying to learn ways to improve. They are also busy, stressed, and overwhelmed at times. As a result, I have grown my patience with my course professors in general, by trusting them to get things done and deliver the course effectively. In addition, knowing how to use different digital media and technology has expanded my creative realm and allowed me to expand my ideas to different mediums creative school projects. In conclusion, my experience at the ITRC not only helped me gain valuable technical and interpersonal skills but also provided me with a unique perspective on the learning process, allowing me to approach my studies with newfound patience and understanding.

Hearing other SASAH students talk about their placements was also insightful. When talking to my SASAH peers, we usually do not discuss EL experiences, so it was interesting to see and hear about what people were learning and doing. The main thing I learned from other students’ question-and-answer period was that not every placement or internship is perfect. There will be

triumphs and failures and unexpected turns, but there will always be something valuable out of a work placement no matter the circumstance. In Ahsif's presentation, for example, he expressed that his time at the Forest City Film Festival wasn't always great, but he learned valuable skills that he ended up using for his later CEL experience in creating a novella. While Ahsif did not experience the perfect placement, he was extremely proud of his novella, which he stated would not have been possible without his experience at FCFF. Hearing classmates' challenges and achievements made me feel more connected and a part of the same journey of self-discovery.

In all honesty, I'm not sure about the impact my placement has on my future career, but I know I will do great things. When I was talking to my manager Deanna about graduating soon, she said, "I'm not going to do the thing where I ask you what you're going to do when you graduate, rather what are you excited about?" Deanna knows that whatever a student ends up doing, it's always something great because of the projects and students that come out of ITRC. Rather than fixating on a career, I'm excited by the fact that I get to add new creative projects I've worked on to my artist portfolio, including project *Namaka* animations and my biology graphic illustrations, because it will show my diversity as an artist. There is no question how wildly successful my projects have been, leaving me with so many skills that I can use for any path I decide to choose, whether it is being an artist, graphic designer, journalist, teacher, etc. This job has opened more possibilities to enter different industries and positions that were never on my career radar before working at the ITRC. While I may not exactly know the impact that these projects have on my future career, I know that they have lit a fire in me to launch myself at any opportunity that comes my way.

Asking myself that question again, "Who am I?", I know way more about myself and who I am in this world. I'm excited to take my technical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills and

apply them to my future endeavours. Armed with a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, I plan to continue to work on personal development and self-improvement, seeking out new challenges and opportunities to grow and learn. As I conclude my time at Western, I aim to maintain the relationships I have built at the ITRC and continue to be an active member of the community, continue so that in the future I can reach out to them for help and, in return, help them however I can. As a Visual Arts and SASAH student, I have found my place at the ITRC, and it will be difficult to part ways from the community as this position was a perfect fit for a SASAH student like me. Whenever I feel scared or concerned, I know that I can fall back on my projects that I achieved while at the ITRC. Becoming a Student Digital Media Designer has shaped my understanding of myself and brought me out of spirals of fear and doubt. With my newfound sense of self and clarity about my values and passions, I plan to pursue a career in the creative arts that aligns with my interests and allows me to make a positive impact on the world. At the same time, my position has fostered a sense of belonging through many challenges, achievements, and opportunities, revealing the impact I have in my communities. My experiences at the ITRC have opened my eyes to the power of experiential learning, and going forward, I hope to continue to seek out opportunities for hands-on learning and skill-building in all areas of my life.

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