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Learning from Experience: My Time with SWIM and READ

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Learning from Experience: My Time with SWIM and READ

Before getting involved in my community-engaged-learning placements, I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to do once I graduated this year. I had a lot of options and ideas that I was trying to choose between, but the main things I was weighing was whether to go into a career like publishing or into teaching. After doing these placements, I can successfully say that I know where my skills and passions lie, and I feel I can take what I have learned here anywhere I go.

The first placement I did was with a local program called Single Women in Motherhood, or SWIM, which aims to help provide single mothers with the resources they need to succeed on their own in the world and provide for their families. But my experience at SWIM was vastly different from what I expected it to be when I signed up for its project “Twenty Stories of Hope.” Originally, when this project was described to me, it sounded like I would be picking up from where a former student left off and would be working on writing a memoir-style book based on interviews with single mothers about their life experiences. However, once I began working at the organization, I found that there was a high level of disorganization within the project regarding expectations and outcomes for the book; in other words, my supervisor had an idea of what she wanted the book to be but did not really know how to communicate it to me, so the project had no sense of direction. As well, there was a near-complete loss of all of the research and work the former student had done, and because it took several weeks to be able to make contact with her, those of us working on the project had no foundation either, so for the first little while I felt like I

was floundering, like I was struggling to figure out what to do simply because there was not much I was given to do. Nonetheless, it did prove to be a valuable learning experience, as well as a good test of character and ability for me.

Because we lost all that work that the previous student had done, we were given alternative tasks to work on until we could contact that student and get the work back. Since we were unable to contact the student to retrieve the work until three-quarters of the way through my internship, these alternative tasks filled up much of my time at SWIM. They consisted of forming a campaign plan, researching publishing companies and finalizing a book product, drafting interview questions, and brainstorming and contacting advertising sources. Seeing as how we did not have any of the work on the book, we were tasked with doing the work around the book and restarting on collecting nominations for people to interview for the book. My partner and I spent approximately three-quarters of the time at the internship organizing the project and doing research and starting to launch it before we got some of the work back from the previous intern. Once we did, though, there wasn't much time to start into the actual creation of the book material, so we just continued with the primary steps of launching the projects for the remainder of our time, shaping it so the project would be clean and organized and fluid for the next person to take it over.

Because this placement was done virtually, the only time I saw my colleagues was in a once weekly office meeting over Zoom, so I didn't get much of a chance to build connections with others at the workplace. Nor did I truly form any connections with the community, because although I likely would have had much more exposure if I had been doing the project as originally planned and not in the days of COVID, the circumstances of lockdown right now prevented me from doing so. The most communication I had with anyone besides the other

SASAH student working with me (and we relied very much on one another to get our tasks done and make it through this placement) was with my boss and mentor, which was very limited as she gave us the bare minimum of supervision and we really only had communication when I checked in with her at those office meetings. In fact, I had several issues with the lack of communication between myself and my mentor. Right from the beginning, we were not given a very clear idea of what her thoughts and plans were for this “brain-child” of hers: it seemed like she had an image in her head of what she wanted this project to look like, but it was very muddled and disorganized, and she didn’t seem very well able to communicate that idea, instead expecting us to pick up on her understanding. This theme of expecting a lot of us in terms of “just understanding what she means” carried on throughout the term, such as when I was working on my parts of the project and wanted to know what kind of direction to take or was asking advice in office meetings and often received an answer along the lines of “just figure it out,” which left me stuck and really didn’t provide the guidance I needed to create the image of the project she had but wasn’t clearly telling me about. All in all, I conflicted with my mentor, whether it was because we had different ways of communicating, different ways of organizing ideas and thinking, different understandings of the project, or a combination, it caused us to be at odds during the term.

I did struggle on several personal levels over the course of the internship, but in most situations, I was able to turn it around and use it as a chance to improve myself. At the beginning, I struggled with procrastination and finding my ambition as I also tried to find my footing at SWIM. I think the fact that I walked into a project that was already started and in such a chaotic state, with technical problems and very little solid work done, gave me a lot of anxiety; I was constantly wondering how I could possibly contribute to this project and do a good job, and I felt

like I would never be able to meet expectations. This anxiety caused me to procrastinate on the project, to sit back and have someone else organize everything and tell me what I needed to do. Then I faced a lot of critiques from my supervisor and felt that, no matter what I did or how hard I tried, I couldn't impress her, and my self-confidence took a hit. But eventually, when I realized that nothing was going to happen unless I made it happen and that, regardless of how I felt the work needed to be done, I turned that anxiety into a motivator. I made the decision to make my own decisions in the project and not rely on my supervisor and other coworkers to tell me what to do all the time. Once I took control of my portion of work, the book project started to flow a lot more efficiently and we were able to lay the framework the book project needed to be able to get off the ground.

Amid all of this, however, I have not lacked opportunities for learning and self-enhancement. The minimal supervision and essentially complete freedom of creativity (whether or not I was actually given creative freedom on the project: I am conflicted on that understanding) meant that I got lots of time to practice my leadership, self-regulation, and organization skills, while also improving collaboration and teamwork skills in both small and larger groups. Since this was entirely done on my own time, from my own home, I needed a schedule to have work done for the office check-ins and to have my hours completed, and I had to be hard on myself to stay focused. This stems from a lifetime of being a perfectionist and a procrastinator because I don't want to start working until I know I can make it perfect; this is something I am continuously working on overcoming, and I used this placement as a space for doing this. As well, I tend to be disorganized, both in my lifestyle and in my schoolwork, but because of my supervisor's over-disorganization regarding the book project and her reliance on me to clean it up, I felt that I had to overcompensate, and this meant that I exercised my abilities

in organization. Finally, since my partner and I both took turns leading the book project based on whose part we were focusing on at the time, I got the opportunity to take control of a small group and could create the project according to my ideas (within reason—it ultimately was my supervisor's project, and she got final say). I've learned from this experience and these conflicts, though I still have room for improvement on my self-confidence and on speaking up when things aren't going well.

Despite all of the frustrations I have faced in this placement, I feel like SASAH has well-equipped me to handle them, and I have been able to take what I've learned in the program to rise above the challenges and succeed. First, SASAH has improved my ability to work as a team member, so that I could handle a circumstance like this much better than I could before university. Prior to my involvement in SASAH, I was impatient and struggled when not given clear-cut instructions, but in SASAH, many assignments involved me working in a group on a creative project, and even if we didn't always collaborate too well, we always managed to overcome those issues to produce a successful project. Those experiences improved my teamwork skills and patience in difficult situations enough that I could do this placement with a fair degree of professionalism. SASAH has also prepared me to receive and apply criticism well, as such an advanced program as this requires close analysis at many stages of a given project to examine it critically and ensure high academic success, and I have had several teachers where it is only due to their close critical analysis of my work that I was able to see where I was erring and could learn and achieve, something I have not experienced with as many teachers outside of SASAH; I could then apply this to my time at SWIM. And ultimately, the styles and approaches we have in terms of our assessments in SASAH mean that there has been a wide range of opportunities to focus on building up my creativity, leadership skills, and initiative. I love that

SASAH has given me a controlled environment to expand these newer abilities and exercise my already-acquired soft skills, and I feel like all of the different projects that I have done over four years have led me to this point, to be able to do this CEL, from making a magazine in second year to working on the class community project right now. The value of this CEL is that now I can take these skills out for a test drive, so to speak, as an intermediate stage between being a student and being out in the working world. I felt like, by doing this CEL, I was actually able to explore how much I had learned from university and how good my skills were and what I needed to work on before I was thrown out into the working world, even though this particular experience didn't go exactly as planned.

Experiential learning, here, has lived up to its name: I've gained experience in certain soft skills necessary for my career, learned more about what I can improve, and about myself and my passions, all while gaining valuable experience. Of course, creativity, leadership, and initiative are exactly what you need to be a teacher. Every day, these skills would be used, from making the lessons and assignments to teaching the children and leading the classroom to being the person ensuring that each day runs smoothly and efficiently. These skills form the very foundation of teaching, and thankfully, between my classes in SASAH and my time at SWIM, I am getting the chance to build and practice them now, so I can put them to good use for the rest of my life. I also feel like I got a good dose of reality—not every job is going to go the way you want, and you're not always going to have a good working relationship with every co-worker, but in the end, you need to all pull together to get the job done. In the end, when we put together a report outlining the planning, researching, and organizing we had done, I felt like I laid a much more efficient and organized foundation for the next person to take over. After months of learning about publishing,

though, I can safely say that I can't picture myself doing that for the rest of my life. After determining that publishing was not the career for me, I could turn my attention elsewhere.

For this past school year, I have volunteered each week with the local organization R. E. A. D., which is affiliated with the London Public Library. In this program, I was paired with a child who struggles with reading, writing, and comprehension skills (either due to a lack of practice or lack of interest in reading), and we have weekly mentoring sessions where we work to improve that child's skills in fun and engaging ways. R. E. A. D. has provided me with a platform to practice my skills and expand my knowledge on what it takes to become a teacher, and I have had the opportunity to see how valuable it can be to the both of you when you help a child succeed.

At the beginning of the week, I create my lesson plan for that week's session: first, I write an email to send to my partner for them to read, along with an at-home activity for them to do. Sometimes it is something quick and game-like, such as a scavenger hunt or instructions for a craft, and sometimes I give my partner preparatory work for our Zoom meeting, like reading a book and picking some words from it for a planned activity. Second, I attend biweekly Zoom sessions with the program coordinators to learn methods for crafting lesson plans, receive feedback on how the sessions are going and ask questions, and gather new resources and books to use in my sessions. Third, I hold an hour-long Zoom session with my partner where we do a variety of activities that incorporate literacy skills: sometimes we read a book and do an accompanying activity (for example, we read *Mmm, Cookies!* by Robert Munsch and then played restaurant where my partner read cookie orders and made pretend cookies like in the book), and sometimes we do other activities, such as Mad Libs, Pictionary, Reader's Theatre, or we make comics. Since a lot of the children involved in the program are there because they struggle with

reading and then don't like it, the goal of the program is to avoid making it seem like a lesson in school or like homework and, instead, to create a happy, relaxed environment and have fun with the child. I try to do what they like to do and sneak some of that literacy practice in along the way. In participating in this program, I have gained lots of resources for future classroom use and developed an insight on how to connect with a child in order to find the best way for them to learn and to utilize that insight to create my lessons.

This experience hasn't always been perfect, however; there were certainly times when I had a hard time getting myself to keep working. There were a lot of times when I was feeling drowned in my schoolwork and my other placement at SWIM and would find my Zoom session for the week rapidly approaching, and I would be completely unprepared. Then, because I was procrastinating, I would end up falling back on some of the tried-and-true activities I had already used, and thus I wasn't truly gaining anything from this. Other times, I would have a beautiful session planned with lots of educational activities, but they would become completely derailed by my partner because he didn't want to participate due to tiredness or lack of interest, so I would feel like a bit of a failure. But as time went on, I realized how much this child depended on me to coordinate these sessions to become a better reader, and I knew I had to step up, and I got better at organizing and preparing. Meanwhile, I also got better at knowing how to read the room, so to speak, and to recognize the energy of the child and to work with his desires for how to learn. This is something that is becoming more and more prevalent in classrooms, I have noticed, as more often now teachers don't just make whatever lesson they desire to convey the knowledge to the children, but they try to plan them according to how they will be best received by the children (for example, by analyzing whether the children learn best through auditory, visual, or tactile methods and tailoring lessons according to that). Thus, I think working with, not a difficult child

exactly, but one who needs support in a different way, has helped prepare me better for working in a classroom.

Because I spent a year volunteering in this program, and I see my child every week (albeit over Zoom), the two of us have bonded quite well. I always ensure that I start off each session with just some simple chatting with my partner, asking him about how his day has been, what he's been doing in life and at school, and if he has anything fun coming up. By easing into the session with general conversation, it puts my partner more at ease, making him more comfortable with me and with the idea of engaging in reading. When I show interest in him, he is more willing to participate in the activities and books I am excited to share with him. As our relationship progressed, I saw a change in the way our sessions operated as well: my partner evolved from a boy who gave one-word answers, tired quickly, and lost focus during sessions to one who actively involves himself in reading the books and jumps at the opportunity to do the activities, often doing comprehension work on his own without realizing it. After seven months in the program, I have seen drastic improvement both in my partner's ability to learn and in my ability to teach, and I have to give thanks to the program coordinators who have provided me with much help in "teaching me to teach," for it is because of them, as well as because of the bonding between myself and my partner, that I have been able to overcome any challenges I faced during my time at R. E. A. D.

The program coordinators have been wonderful aides in helping me learn throughout this program. In their biweekly check-in sessions with the volunteers, not only do they provide an immense amount of resources—from physical activities, arts and crafts, writing activities, and books for all ages, types of interests, cultures, and English and French practice—but they also provide other tips and tricks, such as how to get children to focus, how to combat Zoom fatigue,

how to work interests into reading practice, how to format emails, and how to keep energy up and get the children not only interested but also invested. The program coordinators help with technical troubles and answer any questions we may have during these meetings. Since, after every weekly meeting with my partner, I submit an entry into the volunteer system detailing what I did in my email and during my Zoom session with my partner, a program coordinator provides individual feedback to me on every session I conduct and tells me what I did well and what I can work on for the next week. The personal feedback has been extremely helpful, constructive criticism from trained literacy experts, and the check-in meetings give me an opportunity to see their faces, and the faces of other volunteers, and to chat and compare with others about what techniques are working or not working. This experience has helped me get a bit more into the London community and the teaching community, as best as I can during COVID, anyway.

As well, the wonderful and immense range of content we are presented with and work with in SASAH has given me extremely useful experience to be able to do this placement. I work with a very energetic and unfocused little boy whose interests and desires for our lessons are constantly changing; as such, I must keep changing my approaches and activities to keep him engaged in the work. SASAH has taught me exactly how to do that: unlike most classes, where assessments are usually tests or straightforward essays, SASAH uses a wide range of creative assignments, where you can approach the lesson or concept from a variety of different angles and attitudes. Getting the chance to explore my own creativity and to observe the unique approaches of my other classmates has expanded my repertoire of techniques and opened my mind to new ways of thinking about things. The same goes for the class material: not only does SASAH teach a wide range of subjects within the arts and humanities (and even includes bits outside of this field sometimes), catering to lots of different interests, but also, in each class, the professors

encourage the students to approach what we are learning from different angles and explore a concept thoroughly. Next year, I am going to go to teacher's college to learn to teach primary/junior grades, and SASAH's classes have helped to guide me in my understanding of how to teach a wide range of subjects and shape those young minds to be open and critical thinkers.

Overall, this experience has been incredibly rewarding. By getting practice working with a child on literacy skills, I am working on building up both hard skills (i.e. how to use the actual teaching resources) and soft skills, like flexibility and patience, and alternate ways of knowledge communication, which I will have to use constantly in a future career in teaching. While it does take some effort to formulate the lesson plans and do the research to plan the activities, every week during our sessions, I feel like I get an hour of fun and games and some relaxing social time, which, while still on the computer, is some human interaction away from the drudgery of most schoolwork. It may have been difficult in the beginning to get my partner to have fun and still practice reading, but seeing him blossom and drastically improve his literacy skills has not only given me a sense of confidence in becoming a teacher, but it has also made me feel like I'm doing some good in the world, like I'm giving my partner the skills he needs to become a successful young man who could change the world someday. I found this experience very valuable in building teaching and interpersonal skills, such as communication, creativity, flexibility, and organization, and in simply being a fun and happy time. I highly recommend this as a good volunteer experience, not just for those who want teaching practice but for anyone who wants to have some fun while making a difference in a child's life.