

What I gained from the Professional Skills Curriculum

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March 22, 2016

I decided to enroll for the Professional Skills Curriculum following advice from friends who had previously completed the course. They recommended it as a useful and informative experience in self-reflection and personal development. These are ideals I put effort into achieving, previously focussed by the Transferable Skills for Physicists module I took in Junior Honours. PSC provided me with a great opportunity to continue honing my professional skills with the guidance of its framework and access to its resources.

After signing up online and picking up my *Passport to Professional Skills* diary from the lovely staff at the CAPOD office, I started my journey on Moodle with the online workshops. I found the way that important concepts were often broken down into their components very useful in learning about these new perspectives on familiar aspects of professional life. I appreciate that some keywords cannot fully describe such complex things as leadership and team management, yet this approach was useful in creating a memorable impression of the important points to be considered.

The other evident aspect was that there is no single correct solution to these skills: there is a diverse field of possibilities, the best option being entirely reliant on environment and the individual themselves. I found that many highly capable people have impressively produced structures to describe effective approaches to these situations as I worked through the tutorials and these were invaluable in giving me insight for how I should act in them. However, as easy as it would be to do so, I think that ultimately I should not rely on these methods and ideas as gospel. Instead, following the value of responsibility set in the course, I should learn from them and use them as inspiration for my own actions as I move forward.

The *Managing a Team* online workshop allowed me to think about teamwork in ways which I had never before considered. For example, I might previously have made the mistake of using group as a synonym for team! I found even simple ideas which I have engaged in all my life, yet never stopped to consider – like the five common features of a team – were highly instructive when conveyed to me. The segregation of the team suggested with the nine Belbin team roles is of course a pure theory describing the real world, yet I found it extremely helpful in understanding the nature of the dynamics of a team.

I found the *Chairing Meetings and Taking Minutes* online workshop to be very practical and will feel confident when next I have to perform these duties.

The *Project Management* online workshop was interesting in its separation from leadership, an aspect of professional skills I now better appreciate. The

essence of the message of this workshop is well conveyed by the project life cycle flow chart, a framework I will certainly apply to any project I undertake. Monitoring progress during, evaluating after and appraising ideas (in the context of previous evaluation) before a project are skills I would say I already employ, but I feel they become more valuable with the new self-awareness I have of them.

I always highly value advice regarding giving presentations as it is a very demanding task, so having another chance to improve this skill with the *Presentation Skills* online workshop was great. Following the Transferable Skills module last year, in which we gave talks on topics we had researched to our peers and lecturers, I found the content reinforced how I approach design and delivery of presentations.

Reaching perhaps the topic of highest interest to me in professional skills, I was excited to do the *Leadership* online workshop. The most outstanding point that I took from this was the difference between the historically perceived view of leadership – in which one man at the top tells everybody else what to do – and the modern methods of leadership. Proven to be more effective, these new approaches focus on respect and understanding running down as well as up. Furthermore, this effectiveness stems from appropriately distributed and situational leadership.

The online workshop *Communication Skills* was one I wish were mandatory for everyone if only for the email etiquette advice! In broader terms, I enjoyed the recognition that communication is evolving quickly with new technologies and the highlight of non-verbal communication in face-to-face ‘transfer of information’ (such descriptions resonate with a Physicist like myself). While usually the last thing on my mind when I talk to others, either singularly or in presentations, I will endeavour to be more aware and in control of my body language.

In my final online workshop, *Developing Others*, I appreciated the discussion of learning through its plethora of forms. In particular, the focus on understanding the context of the development – i.e. the level of the organisation at which it is acting – and how this affects deployment struck me as an important message.

Feeling that I should not complete the course through only a single medium of activity, I also attended a lecture in the first semester, titled *How to engage others*. The speaker voiced many of the values I had previously considered, providing an encouraging agreement with my developing thoughts on leadership skills. In particular, I was struck by his slightly out-of-the-box approach in challenging societal norms and replacing them with more positive alternatives. This concept is beautifully exemplified by the idea of rewarding people who adhere to the speed limit rather than fining those who break it.

Today, I am thankful for the kindness of those who introduced me to the course and grateful to all who made it an enjoyable experience. I will certainly continue their precedent and inform others who I think would appreciate the course. Indeed, I have already advised some people about it – one of whom has already completed the course before me! (Not that it’s a race, of course.) One of the greatest joys of university, in my opinion, is the opportunity of discussion. This was readily available regarding professional skills between those I knew doing and those I knew who had already done the course, contributing heavily to my enjoyment and inspiration.

Now, I will go forwards with all this new knowledge and perspective, but not in a static fashion. Rather, it has fleshed out a foundation for what more

there is for me to learn, for I do not believe one ever stops learning. I hope to continue my personal development in the Laidlaw Undergraduate Internship Programme in Research and Leadership, which I was delighted to have been accepted into earlier this year.