Recollections of a History Student on Summer Research.

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Abstract.

In the summer after my first year of university, I took part in the Summer Programme for Undergraduate Research in Maynooth University. I was one of the assistants to an archaeological project, helping to organize the artifacts and research. Through this process I learned of the value of assessment, found that the project nurtured my passion for history and was introduced to a supervisory relationship. I explore each of these elements with reference to student engagement having experienced my first year of university through distanced learning due to the pandemic.

Keywords: Assessment; Student engagement; Supervisory relationship; Undergraduate research.

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1.   Introduction.

Student engagement has been forcibly changed a great deal since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of 2020, but that does not necessarily mean it is not still a wonderful and important experience for students. On the contrary, student engagement is important for many reasons. For example, a longitudinal research study conducted with university students in Great Britain determined that engagement is positively related to student wellbeing (Boulton, Hughes, Kent, Smith & Williams, 2019). The importance of student engagement with wider aspects of university life for learning is highlighted by findings that engagement is related to students' GPA, sense of satisfaction and pursuit of postgraduate

education (Öz & Boyaci, 2021).

COVID has created a significant challenge for students, particularly incoming first years, and their sense of belonging in university as their expectations that they held about college are shifted (Potts, 2021). As such, the pandemic has required instructors to find new methods for connecting with students and promoting their engagement (Tice, Baumeister, Crawford, Allen & Percy, 2021). One method is to engage students as researchers, as this allows for connection both in person and online if restrictions require.

Personally, I had an amazing experience working as an assistant researcher for six weeks during the summer. While the researcher programme was not developed in response to COVID-19, my whole university experience was online until then. Not only did I get the chance to learn the campus in anticipation of being on site this semester, but I had the chance to connect personally with other people working on the project too. Very importantly, I feel that I gained new and valuable skills, certainty that my chosen field is the right one for me and a new sense of self-assurance.

1.1 The summer programme for undergraduate research.

The Summer Programme for Undergraduate Research (SPUR) is a six-week, paid research programme for undergraduate students. There are a range of 60 summer research projects over all the different departments in the university with sixty-seven places, one or two people per project. It is a very exclusive and competitive programme. Everyone participating receives a Student Experience award from the college for their participation. Participating in research projects allows students to expand their skillset and knowledge, gain practical expertise in their chosen fields and gain confidence among other benefits including gaining "a competitive edge over peers" in the job market (Adams, 2019).

A qualitative analysis of the 2020 Irish Survey of Student Engagement showed that with a sense of university engagement, students felt like they belonged to a community or family, that they were respected as people and that they had a work/life balance. This in turn helped students to engage with their learning (McCashin & Boyd, 2021). I found this to be true, as through SPUR

I met others involved in the programme and connected with them. There was a weekly coffee meet up online for people to chat and ask questions about SPUR to the supervisors of SPUR itself. It ensured that I was not just working but meeting other people and having some relaxation time too.

1.2 The value of assessment in my development.

I found the e-portfolio activities really helpful. The CV checker really helped me to improve my own CV, which was great. I had never really put together a CV before then, so having the checker guide me and tell me what to have, or to remove, was as valuable as gold in my opinion. I feel so much more confident about my CV now.

There were several other activities too, that must be done to assess the effort put into the project and give out the awards. When I compare the two self-reflection exercises, that I had to do at the start and end of the project, I can really see how I have grown throughout my experience, gaining confidence in my abilities. When I look over the entries describing my experience, I really think it helped me mature and flourish as a person. My experience echoes Lackner and Martini's (2017) findings that self-reflective assignments completed as part of university coursework can positively impact on interview performance. I feel that the reflective portfolios were a useful tool for the mock interview conducted as part of the programme and I will be able to return to them for future interviews as well.

The virtual mock interview went over a few generic but common questions which I thought was terrific. I have never done any job interviews, and afterwards I felt much more prepared. It lets you re-watch your responses as well and gives a checklist of points that should be mentioned when responding to each question, which I found really useful.

Then there were the Alumni Panels they put on. Several of the alumni gave advice on how to get into PhD programmes and tips for staying sane whilst doing a PhD. That was brilliant, and so helpful to hear. It was very encouraging that they all agreed that their SPUR experience was a key part of them getting their current jobs or into their graduate programmes. It assures me that my SPUR experience will benefit me in many ways.

1.3 Nurturing a passion.

My mentor on the project was very helpful. He was always happy to lend a hand or offer help with the project. He offered supportive advice. If there was a problem, he was easy to come and

talk to. I feel much more prepared for my future mentor-mentee relationships.

Many studies have shown the benefits to both mentors and students of taking part in research programmes (McSweeney et al., 2018; Golding, Breen, Krause & Allen, 2019), such as skill development and networking. I definitely felt those benefits, such as beginning to build connections in the community through my supervisor introducing me to other specialists working with him on the project or him explaining how different application processes worked. My knowledge was greatly expanded through his help.

He clearly laid out and explained the tasks I had to do and corrected anything I did wrong in a gentle way. Once I had a handle on what I needed to do, he let me be to work at my own pace to complete my tasks. Due to his support and guidance, I gradually grew more comfortable and confident in developing my own autonomy.

Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) define partnership as a relationship that all parties are actively engaged and have the potential to benefit from learning and working together. This can then foster engaged student learning and teaching enhancement. The values of students as partners are trust, community, empowerment, and challenge – all of which I feel were integral and alive during my research work.

I found myself growing in confidence due to his trust. He showed me what to do, then left me to it, facilitating my sense of autonomy. He was not constantly checking in or peering over my shoulder to see if I was doing things correctly. He believed in my skills enough to accept me onto the project despite being a first year, instead of a second or third year like he usually would, and then further showed his faith in me by letting me work without holding my hand the whole way through. As a result, my own belief in myself and my skills grew, and I emerged a more confident person than I was when I began.

I further began to feel a sense of community during my time on the project. Before, I was isolated from the historical academia society, and even my fellow history students, partially due to COVID and partially due to not being exposed to anyone in it, save my professors to a limited degree. Through the project, however, I worked with another student also assigned to the project and we both met different specialists who welcomed us into the world of historical academia with stories about their jobs and advice.

The challenge of working on the project and the fact that I was doing so successfully gave me a sense of empowerment. I was working on an actual project that would have a genuine impact

on the knowledge we have of the history of Ireland, and I was succeeding. The work was not easy, and I was exhausted by the end of the six-week period, but that only made me prouder of myself for finding the strength within myself to make it through.

1.4 The value of remuneration.

I will not deny that I appreciated the payment as well. I would have been happy just for the experience had it not been a paid position, but I was not about to turn down the money. I have never had a paying job before. I am fortunate enough that my family is able to support me while I study, but having money that I personally made was a definite bonus.

The quality of my work would not affect the payment, which is a fixed sum for everyone. However, I believe that the awareness that I would be receiving money for my work made me take extra care with handling objects and paying attention to detail. I would certainly have put my best effort in and taken great care with my assigned tasks regardless, I always do my best to ensure my work is a high standard, but I wanted to live up to the trust my mentor put in me by choosing me for the project and to ensure that the quality of my work would be worth the money I was receiving for it.

2. Conclusion.

I found the whole experience to be one of the most significant ones in my life. I truly feel that it helped me to grow as a person. As a natural worrier, I went in as an unsure first year doubting myself and worrying that I would let down the team. Now, I feel as if my time with SPUR has allowed me to grow as a person. I feel that I am more confident in myself as a person and as a historian. I feel the whole experience of student engagement broadened my horizons. It showed me other, lesser-known aspects of the world of historical academia through the experts who came in during my time working on SPUR. I made connections, expanded my skillset, gained experience for my CV and grew as a person. All in all, I found the experience of student engagement was a wonderful one and would benefit any student who took part in it, whatever way they decided to do so.

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