

The Ups and Downs of Research: How I Learned Through Everything That Went Wrong

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Timeline of Events

- Sept. 2021**
- First meetings with Professor Classens
 - Plans begin to work on the co-op's innovative timebank model
 - Plans begin to conduct general outreach/information gathering
- Oct. 2021**
- At this point, I met our main correspondence from the co-op for the first time
 - We decided that my main project would be a campaign and health/environment impact assessment for the local community pool that was to be demolished
 - This month, I also visited the local community, particularly, to visit the co-op's Farm to Table initiative
 - At this point, I also had meetings with Prof. Classens to discuss the proposal I would be creating
 - This would have entailed the following: 2 literature reviews, and 2 proposals
 - Project A: Pool research project
 - Final deliverable (action-based experiential learning): report on the pool project (history of pool, quotes from people, importance of co-op, the space, semi-structured interviews about pool, etc.)
 - At this point, we also spoke of restructuring a previous survey the co-op had done previously to extrapolate what we could from the existing survey results, and inform future surveys/interviews
 - Project B: Ethnocultural research to study the large Filipino population in the community
 - Survey, focus groups, examine the Philippine diaspora
- Nov. 2021**
- Planned out interview and survey questions
 - Went through survey results
- Dec. 2021**
- To begin collecting existing co-op educational materials to improve them
 - Worked on draft survey
 - Ethics application starts to loom
 - Plan on developing timeline of pool (key dates and developments), collect pool documents
- Jan. 2022**
- Check-in meeting to plan upcoming semester
 - There was ultimately a terminal disagreement between the leadership (co-op board) and the values and principles that the members of the co-op, and the co-op itself, were espoused and dedicated to
 - I then had a meeting with my Research Advisor to adapt to this
- Feb. 2022**
- I met with some of the co-op workers and learned more about the situation
 - A shift in my perspective occurred
 - I completely began shifting and reworking final deliverables
 - Considered a report just on food co-ops, in general
- Mar. 2022**
- Reworked deliverable to annotated bibliography, art piece, and this poster
 - Collected reflections, and gauged what this means for my future as a researcher

INTRODUCTION

I must preface this research poster by saying it will not be like most in the literature. For years, I have read article upon article on everything that went right in so many talented scholars' research works. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for this particular project. Nevertheless, I am incredibly grateful for the experiences it has given me and lessons it has taught me. I hope that my accounts can support young researchers in realizing that there is more to scholarly works than a finalized output to be painstakingly submitted to every journal that comes to mind. Rather, a final report is a product of heart, time, energy, and a learned eye for what is necessary to fill the gap in whatever is being studied. In my case, I see that there is a gap in literature that would have helped me understand the oftentimes overlooked precarity of research, and the fact that this does not make it hopeless. Thus, here are the things I learned not in everything that went right, but everything that went wrong, in my research with a food systems co-op that focuses on food sovereignty and food security in a highly diverse and low-income local community.

REFLECTIONS

Although this project may not have manifested as anticipated, I have no doubt that I have improved as a researcher, and learned things I never would have if everything had gone according to plan.

1. Emotional labour:

In the first couple of months, I began building a relationship with my Research Advisor, the local community I was to work with, the co-op, and its members. As I had more conversations with the co-op's workers, I started to learn more not only about the co-op's logistics, but also, the character of the co-op's workers, volunteers, and community members who are the heart and driving force of it. Through discussions, I began to adopt the feelings of desire to help create positive change in the community as our correspondence at the co-op outlined the potential pool demolition.

2. Balancing my research with cultural heritage and background:

Although the co-op I was working with was based in a community with a large Filipino population, I was still an outsider because I did not grow up there. To connect further with this research and prepare myself, I began reading Filipino literature: a skill I had not practiced in years. This began as a practice for my research but inadvertently connected me with my family and culture in a way I had not anticipated. Thus, I was drawn closer to my community but had to consistently remind myself that while I may have had similar experiences to the Filipino population in this community, there was still a disconnect I had to address and acknowledge.

3. People's actions do not always align with their words:

Notably, there came a turning point in my experiences with this project after speaking to one of the leading members of the board which oversaw the co-op. I met them on one of my visits to the community to see the co-op's work. They were seemingly passionate, driven, and dedicated to the co-op's works, particularly involving the pool, when I spoke to them. They led the discussion with a radical optimism that was a refreshing contrast to the scholarship I consistently consumed in school. This made it all the more disappointing and disheartening when I learned that they abused the co-op's workers because of their need for leverage in Toronto's community-based work sector, leading to the terminal disagreement which dissolved my work with the co-op. I felt a flurry of emotions: sadness, shame, guilt, frustration, anger, and so many more. Upon learning this, I began to doubt myself as a researcher because I could not fathom how easily I had been manipulated. A major fear of mine at this point was developing a cynicism about community-based work and research fuelled by my dwindling hope for the project.

4. The importance of adaptability and empathy to research:

I had to adapt by taking a project plan I had become invested in and changing it in order to produce a deliverable that would still be beneficial to the community and co-op, somehow. Additionally, I had to empathize with myself and realize that it was okay to be disappointed in circumstances that were out of my control.

NEXT STEPS

If you are to take anything away from this poster, I hope it is this: do not be afraid to become emotionally invested in a research project just because it might not work out as planned. Retrospectively, it would be simple to say that I wish I had not dedicated so much time and effort to plans that would not work out, but I do not wish this to be true one bit. I cultivated hope and resilience during this past year, and it would not have happened without the relationships I built on my excitement for this project. With all that I have learned, I am hopeful for future projects and insights I may find into the food systems of this local community and beyond. As it turns out, much can go right in everything that goes wrong.