

POLI 4390: Practicum Placement in Public Policy: NGOs & Government Services

Written Report

April 1st 2022

Muireann Antick

B00811817

Placement: Dartmouth Learning Network

As a child I moved around a lot, traveling through multiple different school districts and not always feeling very comfortable in a school environment. I also had undiagnosed ADHD and Dyscalculia, which made learning at the same rate as my peers incredibly challenging. However, I was in an incredibly privileged position where despite these barriers, my family had the ability to ensure I had the resources and help I needed to make it through school. Without the support of my family, and my undisputed advantage of being a white, cis female, I can confidently affirm that I would not have passed high school, let alone be graduating from University.

While at University I have faced numerous challenges: academically; dealing with life and loss during a global pandemic; and trying to figure out how one becomes a functional and contributing member of society. These lessons are testing, and I have made more mistakes than I can count, but I know with certainty that not everyone has received the same grace from society when trying to find their place. I am grateful to be in the position that I am in, however I am not ignorant to the fact that too many people are allowed to fall through the cracks during their school years, especially those with learning disabilities and those from minority groups. The system fails too many people, preventing them from moving on to post secondary education and employment that would afford them a better life. The difficulties I faced during my time in

primary and secondary school have massively contributed to my drive to understand the inner workings of the education system, and how as a society, we can work to ensure that all children, and adult learners are taken care of and given the best opportunity to learn.

We live in a society where education is recognized as the key to one's future, self-esteem, job security, mental and physical health, thoughtful citizenship, better parenting, and greater participation in the community. Yet, society has failed to substantially recognize the need and importance of adult education; too many people are let slip through the system and are not offered the resources to help cope with previous bad experiences in school or home which impacted early education. When I first found out about the practicum course offered at Dal, I unfortunately was not able to get a place. But in the process of trying to register for the class, I discovered the Dartmouth Learning Network on the list of host organizations. The Dartmouth Learning Network (DLN) is a non-for-profit located in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. The DLN provides opportunities for adults to gain the essential skills necessary to live and work in a modern economy. Their mission is to ensure that everyone has the skills they need to achieve their learning and career goals. They provide flexible classes, tutoring, and online learning options allowing for adults to prioritize balancing work, family, and community, while using literacy and learning as a vehicle to improve their life circumstances. Once I learned about the work being done at the DLN, I immediately knew I wanted to get involved.

When I began volunteering at the DLN in September 2022, my role was to work one-on-one with adult learners. Adults come to the DLN with varying objectives and motivations for returning to education, and more often than not, will have some intersectionality of issues working against them. It takes bravery and determination to return to education as an adult,

hence why many never go back. So before I had even met the learners, I massively respected and admired their courage, and did not want to let them down.

Because I don't have a background in teaching, I was nervous about my ability to provide adequate support, and feared that I wouldn't be able to help them meet their goals. I communicated my fears to my supervisor, Gail Thistle, who has been an incredible support and resource right from the get go! Gail is one of the most committed professionals I have ever had the privilege of working with, and she goes above and beyond to support tutors and learners in every way possible. She generously welcomed me into the DLN, and made me feel supported and comfortable reaching out to her with any questions or concerns, which allowed me to help the learners to the absolute best of my ability. The DLN makes every effort to provide training that connects volunteer tutors with the tools and resources necessary to support an adult learner in achieving their goals. Tutors are provided with opportunities to participate in workshops and training events relevant to adult literacy in Nova Scotia. Training topics include: student learning plans, goal setting and evaluation; reading, writing and math strategies; lesson planning; online tools and resources; etc. Gail pointed me towards these amazing (free) resources, and this helped me feel confident and more prepared to help learners achieve their goals.

On one of my first days at the DLN I had the fantastic opportunity of shadowing a computer basics class. The atmosphere in the classroom was energetic and focused - I felt encouraged by the commitment of the instructor, who managed to successfully engage and inspire a full class, while also being attentive to the varying abilities, and levels of cognition of each student. I got to circle around the classroom and chat with the students; each of which were there for different, yet valuable reasons. Shadowing this class left me feeling inspired by both the

positive attitudes; courage; and resilience of the learners, and the patience; adaptability; and compassion of the instructors.

After being directed to an abundance of resources and teaching materials, and having the opportunity to shadow a class, I was excited to start working with my first learner! For privacy reasons I will refer to this learner by the name Jason. Growing up, Jason faced a myriad of barriers, both at home and within the school system. As a result of these adversities, Jason unfortunately had no choice but to drop out of school in grade 9. As a result, he had large gaps in his education which contributed to difficulties obtaining employment, and severely low levels of self-esteem.

Jason came to the DLN for computer tutoring to help him prepare for the GED exam. Jason started out in a classroom setting, but because he was lacking a few foundational skills, he struggled to keep up. The DLN is incredibly attentive to the needs of learners, and recognized that in his case, individual tutoring would be the best approach as it would allow Jason to work at his own pace, with one-to-one support. Working with Jason was an incredible experience, he was eager to learn, and helped me to understand the challenges he faced in his upbringing and within the school system. I felt tremendously lucky to work with someone like Jason, and quickly realized that I would not be the only one teaching, and that I had enormous amounts to learn from him.

We established a few learning goals at the beginning that we would work towards during our sessions, and then discussed approaches to learning that would suit him best. Each tutoring session with Jason looked different, and as time went on I started to appreciate the importance of flexibility. Even though I had access to incredible training resources, I learned that trial and error was something to latch onto. For example, I am a visual learner and so I make sure to incorporate

lots of visually stimulating resources when I'm learning something new. However, a technique that might benefit me personally, might make absolutely no sense to Jason, and so I would have to reevaluate my method pretty frequently. I enjoyed the feeling of being on my toes, and pushing myself to find activities that would keep him engaged and benefit his learning. In conversation with Jason, I discovered his love for listening to songs and discussing their meanings. I thought that his love for music was something that we could incorporate into our sessions as a way for Jason to learn something new in a way that was applicable in his daily life. For example: when we started learning how to copy and paste, we created a table where he would paste links to his favorite songs and could refer to them in the future for pleasure. As simple as this might sound, music is an area of his 'expertise' and I found incorporating it into our sessions kept him engaged in learning, and contributed to his improved confidence. It also helped motivate Jason to practice the skills we would work on in our sessions at home.

I found that for Jason, while it was important to have goals in mind, too much emphasis on individual objectives became slightly daunting. He would become discouraged if he'd be stuck on a skill for too long, so we moved away from a long-term list of goals, and instead decided it would be best to identify short term objectives that we could work on each day. Sometimes we would have the same objective for weeks. At first, I worried that I wasn't teaching him effectively, but eventually came to appreciate that learning is not linear. Even if a major objective was not crossed off the list, witnessing Jason's confidence levels, his ability to ask for help, and general belief in himself improve with each session, felt like great successes. I made a conscious effort to praise him for the improvements he was making, and enjoyed sharing his excitement over every win, no matter how 'small'. Even if he was unable to copy and paste

something on his computer, witnessing his self-esteem climb was a magical thing to be a part of, and essential for his journey as a learner.

When I first spoke to Gail about potential projects for me to complete during my practicum placement at the DLN, we decided that as an addition to tutoring, I would also conduct a research project on the services, projects, and daily operational challenges of employment in NGOs. I reached out to both staff and volunteers to gauge whether folks would be interested in participating in a short interview consisting of about 10 questions relating to their experience working/volunteering at the DLN. The purpose of the interviews was to learn firsthand from those who have dedicated large portions of their lives to the non-for-profit sector, about the inner workings of the organization. The goal of my research was to identify, communicate, and appreciate the value of what each employee and volunteer contributes to the organization. After I conducted the survey, I used the results to create a guide for new volunteers to benefit from peer experiences, and help get them off to a strong start at supporting learners in achieving their goals.

The participants provided detailed responses, and had nothing but wonderful things to say about the DLN. They all shared the same passion and dedication to the work being done, and feel proud to be a part of an inclusive and collaborative community. The staff and volunteers at the DLN come from a variety of professional backgrounds, some never having stepped foot in an educational institution before, and some who have dedicated their lives to dismantling the systemic injustices within the system. While everyone described the DLN as a supportive and welcoming environment, folks did mention the presence of burnout among the community.

One of the questions included in the survey was about the driving factors behind participants commitment to adult education, and the results were all fairly similar. Many reported to have personal experience of witnessing the impact that low literacy has on adults ability to

function in society, and noted that while there are opportunities in the public school system to address some of these issues, they often go unaddressed. This highlights the integral role that NGO's, like the DLN, play in helping adults feel a part of something again, and to build confidence and make improvements in their lives. Many participants also noted that adults who are brave enough to confront the system deserve recognition, and find this to be all the motivation necessary for their commitment to be part of a movement that turns things around for them.

Another question posed in my survey was regarding the challenges that staff and volunteers encounter in their role. This question provided me with important insight into the operational challenges of employment in an NGO. There was a general consensus among participants regarding the lack of social/psycho support for learners; lack of time to plan and create class material; lack of understanding from the government; and burnout. Instructors only get 15 minutes on the teaching hour to prepare for a class, this is simply not enough time. As a result, staff are forced to work on their own time in order to provide learners with the necessary skills. Under these circumstances, the chance of instructors burning out becomes inevitable, which is a serious cause for concern in a field where finding suitable tutors is an ongoing issue.

In addition to some of the challenges mentioned above, for adults with undiagnosed learning disabilities, instructors are at a disadvantage to provide them with appropriate support. There is never enough funding to allow for proper testing and/or assessments to identify learning disabilities, which can massively impact the learners experience and the instructors ability to support them properly. The last challenge that was shared among multiple participants relates to the funders' expectation for the duality of their roles. Folks come to the DLN with various intersectional challenges such as housing, food shortages, former trauma, etc. that affect their

ability to be present and work towards their learning goals. As such, many staff members often take on a counseling type role. One participant said “I am an instructor but I am often filling a counselor’s role as well because we become entrusted people for our learners where they have been left behind or out of institutions such as counseling and proper mental health services. Adults need to form a relationship before they can feel trust and they get that here. Our funders do not recognize this.” Based on the challenges reported by staff and volunteers, it becomes clear that non-for-profits/ NGOs are always expected to do more with less.

Adults come to the DLN from all walks of life and the mission at the DLN is to support them. The DLN is flexible with its staff and students, and does not turn anyone away unless referring them to somewhere that may be better suited. Participants in my survey acknowledged the strong sense of community at the DLN, where learners, volunteers, and staff are truly invested in each other’s success. This sense of community can in part be attested to the management’s trust in the judgment of staff and volunteers. The management team values their ability to do their job without imposing rigid guidance upon them. That being said, based on my findings, in order for the organization to continue to be a successful and supportive community, in which instructors do not burn out, government support is crucial. More support from the government is needed to ensure that more material and programming time is available for instructors; funding is available to properly assess learning disabilities; and in house counseling services for learners with poor mental health. Organizations like the DLN are absolutely crucial for making significant changes in society, and making the world more inclusive and accepting of diversity. The work they do is life changing, and in order for them to continue, government recognition and support needs to increase.

If you are patient, empathetic, understanding, flexible, goal oriented and open to making the impossible possible, that is what NGOs do best, and I would absolutely encourage you to get involved. Something that I learned at the DLN and think is important for anyone looking to get involved in a similar organization, is that student's have a past that usually has a negative element to it; often it has coloured their present to an extreme degree; the students are taking an enormous risk in trying to increase their literacy and deserve your patience and great respect. This is incredibly important to remember when working with learners. You might not be able to help everyone, and while I have learned a tremendous amount through different learners, ultimately it is about the student and not the tutor. Be sure that you are there for the right reasons, listen and learn, and have patience. My time at the DLN has made me seriously consider a career that involves improving adult education, and I am planning on continuing on at the DLN as a volunteer tutor after the practicum comes to an end.