WYNG Philomathia Student Essay Contest Trip Report

Before this trip, I have yet to step foot in England. In my mind, England is that far away land- because spending 11 hours on a plane is a lot of time- filled with people drinking tea at exactly three in the afternoon, jokingly speaking of course (it never failed to amaze me how a bell will ring to signal people to take a break from their work). Yet, this trip is truly mind blowing, in a sense that it introduces me to a whole new world. There is so much that I gained from this trip, so many inspiring people whom I was fortunate to meet to make this trip way too memorable for me to easily forget.

Maybe it’s because of the nature of the trip, I was able to feel relaxed in this university that is basically the epitome of competitiveness: I mean looking at the admission statistics 16,750 people are competing for 4,307 places. And before arriving at Cambridge University, I have no idea that university libraries can open for 24 hours and that some students quite literally live in the libraries during exam periods. That’s the extent of how hard working the students studying there are, and this really serves as a motivation to me because it proves that as long as they can do it, I might actually be able to succeed too given that I am also as hardworking. Every since I was little, I was taught that as long as I work hard in something, I will be able to refine my skills in that area and work towards the top. But as I start to abandon pencils and erasers for blue ball pens and calculators in exams, I came to realize that hard work only paid off if you are using the right way. I remembered that Mr. McGrath has put it frankly, “The students here (in Cambridge University) are not all genius and smarter than anybody else, they actually spent hours working hard to get there and it shows that just anybody can do it if they work hard enough.” At first, I don’t quite agree with the statement, I felt like hard work is not enough to be the key factor. Yet, as I stayed for another few days at the campus, I was able to feel that it’s not hard work that matters but passion (forgive me for putting throwing this vague concept out there), it’s how serious they are treating their studies that truly mattered in the end. What motivated students to spend their lunches and any free time they can grasp to go over materials for lessons or extra academic papers for supervision lessons is due to their dedication to the subject they are studying. They are not solely treating the subjects as GPA credits or exams that they need to pass in order to graduate but as learning opportunities. Because preparing for a supervision session requires a lot of self-learning.

One thing I am particularly glad about this trip, is the opportunity to experience two supervision sessions with professors and lawyers on a small group basis. Different supervisors may have different styles of teaching and discussion, yet it really depends on how much preparation you put forth for the session. Speaking from my experience, I really enjoyed this kind of teaching style as it compelled me to understand the topic by myself beforehand, instead of sitting there in the classroom stoically waiting for everything to be explained by the teachers. When I first received the preparation materials for the sessions, I was half excited and half nervous because Epigenetics was a topic I had never heard of. It didn’t help that I didn’t
learn about genetics in school so I didn’t know any basic information and had to start with a blank page. Although it did take some time to search up information online and go through multiple videos, I finally understood the topic despite having no prior background knowledge. That satisfaction from knowing that I have learnt a new topic by myself and was able to explain to others what it was about was worthed it. This experience reminded me that learning never stops in life and that we continue to learn something new every day, the knowledge slowly accumulates that once you’ve learnt it, it’s yours to keep. Now I can tell anyone all about Epigenetics if they want to know about it- which is actually a small possibility but still.

Another thing I love about the teaching style in the university is that they encourage students to think critically because what makes up the difference between humans and robotics if they do not process the quality to think things through? As Descartes from the seventeenth century said, “I think, therefore, I am.” Thinking with logical deductions supported by examples and explanations save us from moving in the wrong directions or making irrational decisions. It also most importantly, helps us to come up with our own ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Having concepts what we had grown accustomed to be challenged don’t necessarily sit well with us, yet it is through this do we realize how much other possibilities and aspects we had failed to take into consideration. What I have learnt from that conversation I had with academics during the formal dinner was literally ‘think in broader perspectives’ because before then I had never realized that my conclusions were only supported by limited facts. It almost seemed like once I found out that a particular statement was applicable in certain situations, I would already rest my case, turning a blind eye to other possibilities instead of further considering other circumstances in which the statement was not applicable to. I was so used to finding facts to support what I considered was right and not able to look at the full picture of everything. This trip also opened me up to self-reflections and made me realize what I had failed to notice all along.

As far as self-reflections go, that wasn’t the only take away I had. One Dr. mentioned that best lawyers and judges he met are always precise in their word choice so that their words can not be used against them. In order to do that, they think really carefully before they speak and always speak slowly. Speaking slowly is not me at all, I always talk like I only have a few minutes left on earth and I was trying the explain the Big Bang theory and how the evolution of humans occur. To put it simply, I always talk like I am debating, firing words from an auto machine gun at 100 km per hour. And because of that I always find myself not saying the main point of things, always walking in a circle. This skill works when I am stalling but not when I am trying to present an argument in a logical way. So the Dr.’s reminder resulted in a ‘Bang’ in my head, since then I am trying to think things through, and slowly put my arguments out there supported with evidence. Being precise is important not only in speaking but also in writing, and judging by how my words seemed hastily put together in clumps here and there, filled with unnecessary metaphors and comments, I still have a long way to go, go figures.

I am really glad that I have the opportunity to talk to different academics in this trip on the subjects that they are passionate about, from how atoms made up a human being, breathing life into them, to whether animals have conscience in their mind or from drawing lines from privacy and the right to knowledge to practising law on a daily basis. I got to know more about what different subjects entailed and why students or the academics there picked the subject they studied. That is particularly helpful to me who is standing at the crossroad to the future wondering which way to go, what subjects to study etc. The open day gave me the opportunity to talk to students studying there, I got to know more about lives of a student and their
passion about the subject they are studying for. For one, I met a graduate student studying behavioural science and he told me how the subject is relevant to the postgraduate degree he is looking to do on neuroscience and the study of linguistics. Although all of us might have different plans for the future and different subjects of interests, the sample lectures there gave a taste of what to expect studying for the subject. I was able to go to two sample lectures, one on Law and the other on Psychological and Behavioural Science, both subjects that I am very interested in. And I can really see the difference between the teaching styles, the lecture of Squatters Law is interesting for it is thought stimulating, we were encouraged to think about how to read the law and define some of the concepts there. We got to understand why in some cases the court rules that the Squatter process the right to own the piece of land he or she is living on and why in some cases the original owner got to keep his or her piece of land. It again reminded me that law is all about the precision of language, how in order for something to be established, it must fulfil all of the requirements as written in the law. While the lecture on Social Norms is also interesting for there are small experiments here and there that explained human behaviours on different situations. And because social norms are closely related to us, I enjoyed listening on the topic thinking about how we humans are affected by these social norms on a daily basis. From looking up to the direction where everybody else is looking at, to holding up the door for the next person coming through, to not daring to say the answer that is different from everybody else, it’s truly fascinating to study how other people compel us to behave accordingly. It shone light on how easily influenced humans are.

The days in London are rewarding on a different level, it was my first time going to watch a play in a traditional theatre, my first time watching a musical performance, my first time for a lot of things. I appreciated the artistic side of London on the many plays, theatres, musicals just around the corners and the architectures composing of Victorian, Georgian and Edwardian style that contrasts the modern Art Deco style across the river where high rise buildings are situated. The merge of modern and traditional made London a special hub for culture and diversity. (I also have to give a lot of credit to the beautiful architectures in Cambridge University, the chapels and buildings are seriously stunning.)

All in all, I am really thankful that I got to experience these on this trip, this trip will remain as one of the most memorable ones where I rediscovered friendship, learnt valuable life lessons, met with many brilliant minds, and gained ideas on my future career path and subject path. I sincerely thank you all once again for making this trip possible. Many thanks must be given to Ms Yip and Ms Ho for accompanying us on this trip and babying us, and also to Ms Tsui for the coordination and communications work and last but not least thank you to all the organizers that helped made this possible.

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All photos taken by Kristen Lai, 2017
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