From My Perspective...

The Indirect Path to Academe

Kirk Luther, PhD

When I was finishing high school, I wasn’t completely sure what I wanted to pursue for a career. Since one of my hobbies involved tinkering with computers, I decided to attend a technical college and study infor­mation technology (IT). However, after finishing the program, I felt as though a career in IT wasn’t the perfect fit for me. I liked the program and still enjoyed working with computers, but this career choice wasn’t something that interested me as much as I thought it would. In order to reevaluate my personal and career goals, I took some time off to think about the direction I wanted to take my life.

It was important to me that my break be meaning­ful, so I decided to volunteer with an organisation called Canada World Youth—an international volunteer pro­gram that provides young people with the opportunity to travel overseas and gain leadership experience. The program pairs a Canadian youth with one from the part­ner country, and each pair spends 3 months in Canada and 3 months overseas. In my year, the partner country was Kenya. My group lived with host families and spent time volunteering with various local organisations doing work on social justice issues and environmental stewardship. Joining this volunteering program was one of the best decisions I ever made as I could take time to figure out the career I wanted for myself, gain leadership experience, and learn more about the world in general (which was helpful to me since I grew up in a small town in Canada and this was my first experience abroad). In addition to the new skills and perspective I gained, one of the most life-changing parts of this experience was that I met my wife! As I said, one of the best decisions I ever made.

After completing the volunteer program, I was still struggling with the type of career that I wanted to pur­sue. I now knew that I wanted to do something where I could help people and make a difference. I had always been interested in the study of human behaviour, and I thought the best way to pair that interest with a career in helping people would be to study clinical psychol­ogy. That led me to enroll at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) and to complete a B.Sc. (Hons.) in psychology. I have to admit to some apprehension about attending university as I was a bit older than the majority of my classmates. However, I decided to push forward and stick with it.

During my undergraduate degree, I wanted to obtain research experience. Fortunately, I came across Dr. Brent Snook’s lab. He studies human behaviour within the criminal justice system and is an expert in the field of investigative interviewing. Volunteering in the lab and working with Dr. Snook opened up another career option for me—experimental psychology. Prior to this, I had never really considered being an experimen­tal psychologist. In fact, at the time I knew very little about what an experimental psychologist’s job entailed. I quickly learned that this career is quite unique; every day presents itself with a different challenge or ques­tion to answer. While there is no set day-to-day routine, typical tasks involve designing research projects to answer theoretical and/or applied questions, delivering lectures, supervising and mentoring students, publish­ing your research in journals and books, and presenting your research to practitioners and academics at con­ferences around the world. All of this appealed to me. Fortunately, Dr. Snook agreed to supervise me for my M.Sc. and PhD degrees (I think mainly because I kept him caffeinated).

During my PhD, my research revolved around two main themes. The first theme was safeguarding legal rights for both adults and youth. Whenever someone is arrested, they are permitted certain legal rights (e.g., right to silence). It turns out that people don’t under­stand much of their legal rights (less than 50% in many cases). My colleagues and I have been working on ways to improve people’s comprehension of their legal rights through various theories from psychological science and digital technologies (which allows me to incorpo­rate my IT education).

My second research interest is investigative inter­viewing. Being able to conduct effective interviews with witnesses, victims, and suspects is a key role for police officers and security professionals. As researchers, our goal is to provide these practitioners with tools that are ethical and based on the best empirical evidence to help them do their jobs. I’ve had the pleasure of work­ing directly with police officers and other practitioners, and it is extremely rewarding to see findings from our research be incorporated into practice.

As my PhD studies came to a close, I began looking for a job and saw an amazing opportunity at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom. It was a permanent lectureship position, equivalent to assistant professor in North America, and it provided me the opportunity to work alongside Professor Paul Taylor (an expert in coop­eration and negotiation). I plan to continue my themes of research on legal rights comprehension and investi­gative interviewing here in the United Kingdom.

While I am still early in my career, my advice for you is to take advantage of every opportunity possible. I can’t stress this enough. Whether it’s taking part in research communication contests (e.g., Three-Minute Thesis), applying for funding, delivering a guest lec­ture, or presenting your research at a conference—all of these activities will provide you with invaluable learning experiences that will not only help you to practice important skills, but also develop a strong and competitive curriculum vitae (CV). Also, make sure that you find a supervisor who you work well with— I wouldn’t be where I am today without Dr. Snook’s mentorship. Most importantly, don’t worry if your career path isn’t quite set out yet—the indirect path can be much more fun.

*As noted, Dr. Luther is a lecturer at Lancaster University. He enjoys traveling with his wife, Elisabeth, and their son, Noah. He also enjoys the sunny days in the United Kingdom by going on hikes or playing golf (albeit, [he says] poorly).*