

Reflection

RESL 1500: Research Competency

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Before my involvement in research, I had a very limited understanding of what research actually was. When I thought of research, my mind went to science, labs, and experiments. I didn't realize how much research applied to tourism or how the industry relied on it for success. I was first introduced to research when I received an email offering me a position as a Tourism Research Assistant Co-op with the Career and Experiential Learning (CEL) department at Thompson Rivers University. At the time, I was still studying abroad in Tasmania and had no idea what I was getting myself into. I had never conducted research before, but I saw it as an opportunity to try something new and challenge myself. It felt fitting that I was doing a co-op within the CEL department, as co-op helps students explore different career paths before graduating. Research was an area I had not considered as a future career, but this opportunity gave me a reason to explore it.

When I first started the position, I felt way in over my head. I didn't think I had the skills or knowledge to conduct research. However, with the help of my supervisor, Jamie Noakes, I was supported throughout the process and slowly found my footing. Over time, I began to understand what research actually looks like and how it can be applied in tourism. I started to see that research wasn't as intimidating as I initially thought. Through my co-op, I developed practical research skills and built my confidence. One of the most valuable things I learned was how to conduct effective interviews. As a tourism student, I found this especially important because the industry is built on people and connections. Learning how to ask meaningful questions and engage in conversations with employers showed me that research is not just about data, but about understanding people and their experiences. This also allowed me to network with industry professionals and gain insights on the industry from an insider perspective. I also learned how to write ethics proposals and research reports. Writing ethics proposals taught me how to be clearer, more direct, and specific in my communication. At first, I found the process frustrating because I received revisions. It felt like I had done something wrong, but I came to understand that feedback is a normal and necessary part of the research process. It helped me improve my work and changed how I respond to feedback by seeing it as an opportunity to improve and not failure.

This co-op experience introduced me to the field of education and work-integrated learning. The focus was on tourism employers, but I expanded my knowledge into another area that I didn't know existed. Research has helped me develop knowledge in areas I would not have explored on my own.

During my co-op, I was introduced to both qualitative and quantitative research methods. I found that I was more drawn to qualitative research because it focuses on understanding people's experiences and feels more meaningful. This influenced my approach in my Graduation Seminar research design, as I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with students. I wanted to better understand their study abroad experiences and how they make decisions while travelling. Going into my Graduation Seminar, I felt much more confident in my ability to conduct research. One of the biggest differences between my co-op and my seminar was that my co-op project was someone else's idea, while my seminar research was my own. It was something I was genuinely interested in and had my own personal experience with. I found myself thinking more critically and asking stronger questions in my interviews to help target specific themes I was looking into.

My Tourism Kamloops project was another experience that significantly shaped my understanding of research. Early in the research process, I realized that many filming locations were not accessible to the public, which made it difficult to create traditional film tourism itineraries. I felt a sense of defeat because I didn't think I was going to be able to produce a feasible itinerary for Tourism Kamloops. I had to shift my thinking and come up with a different strategy. I changed my approach to focus on the landscapes and overall experience of the places. This showed me that research is not always about finding the direct answer, but also about how you can adapt. From this, I developed themed itineraries based on storytelling, landscape, and visitor experience.

These research experiences are important because they have real impacts on both education and industry. Through my co-op, I contributed to improving connections between employers and students in co-operative education. Creating stronger connections can lead to better opportunities for students and help them feel more

prepared for their future careers. This research can directly influence program development and student outcomes. In my Graduation Seminar, I found that many students felt unprepared before going abroad and would have benefited from a more country-specific orientation. Instead of having a general orientation, more specific preparation could help students feel more confident before their first international experience. My Tourism Kamloops project showed me how research can be used by destination marketing organizations to improve visitor experiences and destination appeal. The itineraries I created are a starting point, but future research could explore how effective they are, whether visitors are using them, and how they can be improved based on feedback. Research is not just used for academics but as a tool that can guide decision-making in the tourism industry.

Looking forward, my research experiences will continue to impact how I approach my future career. I have already seen this by applying what I learned in my co-op to my Graduation Seminar. I felt more confident taking on a research project and working through it independently. I want to continue being curious and taking initiative. One of the biggest things I learned is that I can find answers myself. In the future, I hope to work for a destination marketing organization. I would feel comfortable conducting research to better understand visitor experiences, develop new tourism products, and better position a destination. For example, I could design surveys or conduct interviews to gather feedback and improve tourism offerings. Similar to my Tourism Kamloops project, I could also develop new products based on visitor interests and evaluate their effectiveness on the destination over time. Overall, my research journey has completely changed how I view and think about research. What started as something unfamiliar has become something I now see as valuable and applicable in my future career. These experiences have not only strengthened my abilities as a tourism student but have also sparked a new interest in research that I will carry forward into my career.