

Alyssa Lai, Writer, Communications Consultant, and Winner of the International Student Award for Academic Excellence



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In October 2012 Alyssa Lai, graduate of the Communication Studies program at McMaster, received the International Student Award for Academic Excellence from the City of Toronto. Alyssa was chosen to receive the International Student Award for Academic Excellence award from universities throughout the Greater Hamilton Toronto Area.

We caught up with Alyssa, currently writing for *Hamilton Magazine*, interning at the

Immigrant Women's Centre (IWC) while working part-time as a Communications Consultant for the Community Centre for Media Arts (CCMA), to ask her about the award and about her experience as an international student at, and graduate of, McMaster.

What was your experience as an international student like at McMaster?

It was daunting, nerve-wrecking and exciting all at once. Studying abroad was a dream come true for me. Coming from Malaysia, a tropical country, traveling and staying abroad was quite an adventure.

On my first day at Mac, I felt an energetic but comforting vibe around the campus. Fellow students were enthusiastic and the size of the campus was just nice, not too overwhelming at all. In fact, Mac and Hamilton in general strongly reminded me of my hometown, Ipoh.

Starting off as a "foreigner," so to speak, I spent lots of time observing, taking a plunge to try things out and consequently, learning

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from there. Initially, simple greetings like "How's it going?" often confused me as it seemed perplexing to respond to a question that asks about the "method" of something that was in motion. That was just one of the many social cues that I picked up as I met and interacted with peers, professors, and staff.

Because Canada (like Malaysia) has diverse ethnic groups, I did not feel too excluded from the community. But of course, it was still a challenge to try to integrate and connect with the Mac community during my first year. I was quite conscious about my accent and slang, afraid that locals wouldn't understand my "Malaysian English."

But the real turning point during my time at Mac was my second year in university, where I was officially part of the Communication Studies and Multimedia department and Theatre and Film Studies program. Classes were significantly smaller. From there, I got to know my professors at a personal level. Through conversations and consultations with them, I gained opportunities to do research work with them and as a result, began to explore my own interests.

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In second year I began volunteering frequently. Under the Peer Helper Program (now the Student Success Leader program), I provided ESL support to students looking to improve their English-speaking skills. It was a breath of fresh breath of air to do things outside of the academic context. More importantly, I learned the value of giving support and being a part of a larger goal to "do good" to the community.

I also went on service-learning trips abroad and locally and became a mentor for students with learning disabilities. Research work in communications and practical theatre work in productions and outreach became a staple in my university diet. I ventured into teaching by leading tutorials for the Introduction to Communications course during third year and took a stab at co-directing at the McMaster Fall Major Production, Stressed! A Musical Revue. While doing all that, I remained engaged in my Communications and Theatre and Film courses. It was easy to do so because they were all really fascinating and intriguing to me.

To what do you attribute your success?

My accomplishments are a result of the support I've received in various ways and from different people. My family back home in Malaysia has always been my pillar of strength. Though separated by many oceans, they always made a point to check in; I don't know anyone else who would take phone calls during wee hours in the morning. That alone was a huge motivator in facing any hurdle throughout university.

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experience here in Canada. Since I truly enjoyed every course that I've ever taken at Mac, I have nothing but good things to say about all the professors who have taught me. They were, without a shadow of doubt, all knowledgeable and well-versed in their work. But most importantly, I am grateful for their openness and willingness to respond to questions by curious students like me.

The staff members at the Student Success Centre also deserve special mention. They introduced me to the world of volunteerism, where being a part of your community means giving back to the very people you live with.

The story behind my successes is not about a one-woman journey to fame and glory. I'd like to think that my accomplishments are theirs as well.

What was the most important experience you gained at McMaster?

The moments that I relished the most was when I (literally) got a chance to lift my butt to do other things besides sitting down and listening to lectures. As bizarre as it might sound, it was the case for me in many different occasions. During tutorials and lectures, there were many moments where I had to stand up, form groups with other students to discuss questions and ideas. Similarly, when doing presentations and when teaching, I stood in front of crowds of various sizes, to illustrate a point. I am a very animated person and I tend to articulate my ideas using hand gestures. Standing up to do that was much easier.

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Working in theatre, I was always on my feet, either on a 20-foot ladder to hang lights, in a workshop for scene development, or just running around trying to track down my actors. Doing community service abroad and locally too required me to be physically active. It was certainly the case, regardless whether you were painting locker rooms or carrying adobe bricks to build a wall (they are made of sand, clay and silt, weighing at least 28 lbs).

To boil it down, I learned the most when I stepped up and away from the lecture chair. It was when I moved away from being just a talking head, to be in the process to doing something of value. That, to me, was the most important experience as a Mac student.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received in your life?

That would be this: knowledge is a verb, not a noun. It was a statement by Dr. Catherine Graham, a Theatre and Film Studies professor. It was merely an offhand remark she made to illustrate an example in class. While I couldn't remember what she was referring to, that statement resonated. It shaped the way I perceive education and learning in general. It struck me that teaching and learning includes the act of doing. It's active, not passive. Students and teachers are both applying theories and concepts into real-world situations. Eventually, that became my approach to teaching in tutorials. Moving forward in the path to academia, I will always keep that in mind as part of my teaching philosophy.

What advice do you have for McMaster students?

Continue to be curious about the world you live in. I would not advise any student to "find their passion." It implies that passion is a "thing" existing somewhere that you should seek. Like the Holy Grail, the phrase unmistakably suggests that all the world's problems (and your problems) would be solved if you (somehow) manage to find "the" passion. How would you know that that is your passion until you try it out?

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Instead, curiosity translates to exploration. It means taking the risks and being adventurous to experiment with new ideas, take on different roles and responsibilities, and feel slightly disoriented from doing so. This uncomfortable spot I referred to is always present whenever you attempt something new – when tackling a new assignment, when assuming new volunteer roles, or when deciding which course to take in the next semester.

Let yourself be intrigued. Have a fearless desire to learn. From trial and error, you will notice what you like and dislike, areas where you thrive or need to work on for improvement. It was certainly the case for me, as I developed my interest in teaching. Continue feeding your curiosity as you move beyond university.

Why did you choose McMaster?

My grade 12 history teacher, who graduated from Mac, had been the prime influence in my decision to pursue undergraduate education at Mac. I was accepted to all the universities I applied to (Ryerson University, Carleton University, and Western University). Mac stood out not because I knew I would adore Hamilton (though I really looked forward to experiencing the city). But Mac was the choice because he managed to reignite my interest in history. His teaching style was more than engaging; he cared about his students and never failed to offer the tools for us to succeed. As someone who cared little about history (because it seemed "boring" to my 17-year old self), I found myself unexpectedly looking forward to his classes, to learn about the French Revolution and the World Wars, to name a

few. His ability to do all that was a testament of the kind of educational experience he had, one that moulded him to be such an engaging teacher.

So, when he told me he was from Mac, I wanted to learn more. By the time he finished describing the campus community and how was it like to live in Hamilton, I was sold.

You used to write for CBC Hamilton. What is it like to write for them?

As with other things, I started writing for them out of sheer curiosity. Journalism was never in my radar as an undergraduate student. I job shadowed a journalist at the Hamilton Spectator for only one day during my second year. But after seeing her chase a story hastily because another newspaper had already picked up on it, I was already terrified by the unpredictable nature of the news world. It was a world governed by a changing structure – because the "deadlines" of each story react to the events happening around the city.

After graduating and upon reflection, I realized I needed more experience in non-academic writing. I stumbled upon the opportunity to write about the Hamilton Fringe Festival upon meeting with the executive producer of CBC Hamilton during July 2012. Like other people who have given me opportunities to explore my (many) interests, he took the leap of faith and allowed me to write a story about the festival.

That story sent me out to the streets of downtown Hamilton, armed with a microphone and a camera, to interview Fringe audiences and photograph the event. There was no prior planning to that because I had no idea what it meant to "do journalism." I knew I could write a story about the event, but I did not know how exactly would I do that.

That [first story](#) was less than 200 words, with a short slideshow and voice-over. It took me two days to write just that. But in process of doing so, I learned several things about journalism, including asking for first and last names when interviewing, being observant about the environment to describe the event, and simply getting the facts right (ie. number of attendees, name of location and show, etc.).

They say the first is always the hardest. I couldn't agree more. From there, I started pitching stories and writing for them voluntarily, producing [more than 20 articles](#) while working full-time. I also photographed many community events happening in Hamilton on behalf of CBC Hamilton (eg. Supercrawl, Open Streets, monthly Art Crawls etc.). My photos are up on their [Facebook page](#).

Amidst the fast-paced world of journalism, there were many striking moments as well. One of them was during a phone interview I conducted with a woman suffering from domestic violence. It was for a story about [women rallying for safer streets in Hamilton](#). The first challenge was to obtain contacts of those who were affected. The organization I approached were hesitant and did not allow me to speak with any women suffering from domestic violence, though my intentions were genuine: I merely wanted to shed light to the issue by having perspectives of those who were in abusive relationships. They did offer to put out the word. From there, it was up to them to contact me.

By sheer luck, a woman took the first step and expressed her willingness to speak with me. Of course, I immediately followed up. We had a 45-minute conversation about her experience living in fear, pain, and how she eventually summoned the courage to leave her previous abusive relationships. She had never met me and yet, she trusted me enough to share her story. I developed a friendship with her and went on to write about a website for domestic violence resources (I in Four.ca), started by her with other survivors, for the Immigrant Women's Centre's newspaper, the Women's Press,

I was deeply moved by her courage. But most of all, in a broader sense, I was humbled and in awe of the faith that people have in journalists, as they disclose all kinds of information to strangers like me. As I continue to chase for stories and information relentlessly, I vowed to never forget and misuse that level of trust the public have in people like me – information-seeking creatures in the news world.

Do you enjoy / have any comments on journalistic writing?

As someone so used to writing (at least) 1500-word essays, journalistic writing was a real challenge to me. For every story that I've written, the KISS principle (Keep It Simple Stupid) has never left my mind. Journalism is very brief, concise, and snappy (for magazines, especially). The lead and headline are both of prime importance, as they play a key role in drawing the reader's attention. It is not to say that journalistic writing is superior to academic writing; they are merely two different worlds. My goal, however, is to learn how to navigate both worlds, as an aspiring professor wanting to gain practical experience outside of the academia. In that sense, journalism broadens my horizon, because I gain additional experience in writing. It has been more than three months but doing journalism and speaking in their lingo is still a challenge for me. I sense that I have only seen the tip of the iceberg and as a result, I am enjoying this process of learning and discovery.

While at McMaster, you worked as an intern for the CBC. What was your experience like as an intern for the CBC? What was your title? What was the timeframe of your work at the CBC?

Being the first student representing CSMM at CBC's research department was both an honour and of course, an exciting gig. I held the title "Research Analyst" for my two months interning at the Toronto office during summer 2010. As with first timers, my role wasn't concretely defined. Naturally, I had a chance to be involved in a variety of research projects, aside from having daily tasks to perform. One of my daily responsibilities is to compile the Daily Audience TV reports. Drawing from BBM Canada, I pulled prime time TV ratings from the major broadcast companies in Canada (Global, CTV, CBC) and summarized them in charts. The process was very procedural, which involved some data extraction and work in Excel.

Aside from that, I consulted existing studies to produce mini-reports on various media-related subjects, such as podcasting and ethnic viewership. This meant looking through CBC's research database and finding relevant material that pertained to the topic in mind. The goal was to tell a compelling story,

using the data as a tool to supplement the narrative you have in mind. It's a mistake to throw in any information/stat you could find and hoping that your reader would make sense of it.

From that report-writing experience, I learned to be more mindful of the way I approach and use numbers in my research work. Numbers could mean something or just figures to the average reader. As someone with access to a wealth of research and data in the media landscape, I consider it my duty to make stats and figures accessible to the gentle reader.

Work aside, I was grateful for my supervisor at CBC for offering me various opportunities to be involved in the planning process of various projects in development during the summer. I sat on meetings with vendors to discuss CBC's upcoming cross-sectional research projects in media usage, tested survey questionnaires and proofread various presentations for meetings. My proudest moment was when I was entrusted to train three newly hired research officers to compile the Daily TV Audience Reports, one month into the internship.

Though I was commuting Monday to Friday to Toronto for two months, it felt rewarding to be able to immerse myself in the world of numbers, to learn to make sense out of it all. I emerged from the internship having a more analytical and critical mind. I continued to apply the same skills in the research work I did during my undergrad.

You were a member of McMaster's Cybernetic Orchestra. What did you gain from this experience? What was it like?

The Cybernetic Orchestra is McMaster's first laptop orchestra. It is an open group for individuals interested to learn code and compute to make sound. Spearheaded by Dr. David Ogborn, the orchestra is participatory in nature. We are often receptive of new suggestions for repertoires and improv sessions.

Now, it is tricky to describe what the orchestra actually does. We make sound, but not necessarily music, like the ones you are familiar with on the radio. It involves typing in codes and producing a sound out of it. Depending on the type of code, the tempo and frequency changes. At its best, it is described as a form of electroacoustic music.

As someone with little multimedia background, I did not know what to expect or how I could contribute to the team. It was (again) curiosity that led me to attend their first rehearsal in September 2010. I wasn't sure that I had the ability to speak that technical language and get a good grasp of it. Like other long time members of the orchestra, I started out by testing and playing code. We shared code and tweaked them along the way to make changes to the sound.

The orchestra has performed many times. Each performance was different, as many of them include improv sessions. Our [first CD release](#) is a combination of repertoires developed by fellow orchestra members and improv sessions.

I never knew I could "speak" in a computing language and contribute to the orchestra's work. It is an art form that I didn't think I had the knowledge or ability to be a part of. The experience of making a different kind of sound, yet also having some form of musical structure, was unreal. At the end of each rehearsal, it almost felt like playing in a band.

You have had some amazing service learning experiences through McMaster. What were your service learning experiences like?

It was nothing short of amazing. We were at Urubamba, Peru, which was an hour away from [Cusco valley](#), where the sacred Incan city [Machu Picchu](#) lies. In my two-week trip to Peru, I spent at least five minutes every night, just gazing at the stars. Because we were living at a high altitude area, the stars felt so close. Every corner of the sky was covered with stars. We lived in a hostel in a forest, with mountains so close to us until it felt almost certain that I could reach out and grab them with my bare hands.

Of course, star-gazing wasn't the only thing I did there. Working with Peruvians and other Mac students, I helped a local school rebuild its walls, damaged by a landslide. To do that, we mixed dirt and mud to stack the bricks on top of each other. I was part of the "dirt-mixing team," where we had to constantly dig the earth and mix them together with water using a spade. If you stopped digging and mixing, everything else would be delayed – because there was simply no more mud to stack the bricks.

Work was exhausting, both physically and mentally. I wasn't trained to do heavy labour. All those time spent on reading books and writing papers did not prepare me to that level of physical challenge. Similarly, hiking Machu Picchu really tested my resiliency. The steps were steep and there were no proper railings to hang on to for support. I recalled panting continuously as I hiked up the mountain. Going down was just as challenging and even more scary; you had to be careful not to slip and fall.

It was hard to say which was more challenging: meeting the physical demands of the trip or having the mental strength to plow through any obstacles encountered. I found myself pushing my physical strength in ways that I have never done before, such as digging dirt and mixing them with water continuously for hours. At the same time, I was summoning every bit of my will to persevere and keep going, especially when hiking up to Machu Picchu.

But at the end of each day, I always felt contented. It felt rewarding, to be able to do hard work and knowing that you've pushed yourself to the limit for the day. As I sat down to gaze at the stars, I looked forward to the next day, where I get to challenge myself even further.

What did you learn through your service learning experiences? / What was the most surprising? / What did you gain from them?

Even after three years in university, including countless papers and presentations needed to be completed to fulfill course requirements, I did not anticipate that I would learn so much from having this raw and hands-on experience working with the local community of a foreign country. The books taught me much about world issues and social justice. But nothing beats the real life experience of being in the field and working together with like-minded individuals committed to social change. As they say after all, seeing is believing.



Alyssa on service learning trip in New Orleans

At the same time, I was humbled by the sheer dedication and ingenuity of the locals in the work they do. This was certainly the case for me in Peru. A local construction worker, whom we affectionately called Maestra (loosely translated as the one who instructs), was supervising our work in construction. She was at least 50 years old. But her energy surpassed all of us youngsters; she started work at the crack of dawn and stayed on till late evening. She was relentless. We all had something to learn from her. It was a rare opportunity to take a leaf out of her book, an experienced and wise woman who held gold standards in patience and commitment.

When your body is not used to hard physical labour, it sometimes feels like you have made a trip to the war zone and back. You long for a hot shower at the end of each day. Instead, you find yourself jumping in circles, as you take in cold water dripping from the showerhead under low pressure. Yet, it was surprising to learn how much you could do with your body and simultaneously, how little you actually need to have under your belt to make a difference. Of course, the wall we built did not put a dent on the universe. But it meant so much for the school's infrastructure and for the kids studying there. Knowing just that was deeply satisfying.

Peru was my first service-learning experience. The same sense of discovery and feeling of being challenged was also present in my one-week service-learning trip to New Orleans. Working with a larger group this time (40+ students in total) and taking on a leadership position (I was one of the six Assistant Team Leaders), the environment was different than the tightly knitted group in Peru. Regardless, there were still challenges, such as team management and co-leading with other leaders. Both trips offered opportunities for me to learn, as I began to recognize how adaptable I was and how well I interacted with other people in the team. Whatever that I've gained from service-learning where anything but tangible goods. Service-learning is a lived experience. By sharing my own perspective in the field, I hope to turn (in)tangible goods like patience, dedication and hard work into actions, motivating others to be part of the change.