

My Amazing Self-Directed Work Experience

► Don't be shy to reach out for hidden opportunities

By Jennifer Liu

In the summer of 2006 I did my first co-op work term as a self-directed placement at Sutton Group Realty Services Ltd. where I worked as a Junior Marketing Assistant. I finally got a taste of working in an office from nine to five. At the time, I was already working for Sutton providing part-time staff support in their marketing department. I knew that the co-op experience was meant to provide new challenges and experiences to students so I didn't think there would be any harm in asking my supervisor for an opportunity to take what I was doing to the next level through co-op. I was pleasantly surprised when she said she would love to have me as a full-time staff member for the summer. We worked together to design a curriculum that would help me maximize my learning and from May to September.

Although I had some doubts in the beginning, ultimately I believe that doing a self-directed co-op placement was the best thing I could have done. There were various reasons why I thought working for Sutton was a great choice for me; I was comfortable with the people and I thought I knew what to expect in terms of the work involved. I realize now that I was wrong on both of these assumptions. What really made the experience great was my own willingness to learn and be open to my surroundings. Since I was already comfortable with the office, I thought that I would avoid the awkwardness that comes with being intro-



Co-op student Jennifer Liu (right) with her supervisor, Patricia Fu, head of marketing at Sutton.

duced to a new environment. However, this was only true to the extent of knowing people's names. Everything else from what to wear and how to fill the dishwasher had to be learned from the ground up.

As a full-time staff member, I got a true taste of what it was like to be with co-workers every single day and all the unspoken office politics that go with all those hours spent together. Also, between countless meetings and lunches, my interpersonal communication skills developed to a level beyond merely being able to debate with classmates in tutorials. It was strange

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Top Co-op Employer: BC Forest Service

► Planes, trees and automobiles

By Corwin Odland

If there is one piece of advice I have for all co-op students, it is this: never forget visual aids on the roof of your car when driving to a presentation! Unfortunately, this is a lesson I learned the hard way. I was sent to hold a community meeting in a town that was concerned about a nearby wildfire. The maps



Co-op student, Corwin Odland, flying in one of BC Forest Service's helicopters.

were essential because they showed exactly how far the fire was from the community. In the shuffle of loading the car, I set the maps on the roof and never remembered to put them inside the vehicle. Luckily, one of my colleagues was able to draw a picture on a chalk board, complete with stick men and box houses, to show roughly where the fire was.

Going with the flow is a requirement when working for the B.C. Forest Service Protection Branch, which is the government agency responsible for managing wildfires throughout the province. A major part of wildfire management is constant communication with the public and that was my job last summer. I worked as a Fire Information Officer at one of the six fire centres in B.C. This position was a lot of fun, but also proved to be very challenging.



Smokey Bear was just another co-worker for Corwin.

The fire centre I worked for in Castlegar, B.C., had only one Information Officer, me. My main responsibility was media relations. Early in the fire season I spent a lot of time educating the public about fire safety through radio, print, and occasionally television. As soon as fire season started heating up (excuse the pun), my contact with the media became a daily occurrence. I was on the radio almost every day, and every press release I sent out was published in at least a couple of papers. By the end of the summer, I had a close working relationship with many different reporters and journalists.

When I wasn't talking to media professionals, my time was spent doing community relations and creating internal newsletters for all the staff. I was responsible for updating my fire centre's Web site and public hot line so that people could always have accurate information about the current fires. Regardless of how much information I released to the public, there was never a shortage of people calling to ask questions. To keep all information consistent, almost all those calls were forwarded to me.

If I ever had a "quiet" period, my time was spent on boring and mundane tasks like flying around in helicopters and going on an air tanker (the planes that drop retardant on fires)

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to see how interactions during my full-time experience were completely different from my part-time experience in that same office.

Besides being a student, I was also the youngest person in the office. This made me feel like I was everyone's little sister, as they were all supportive and incredibly helpful in giving me not only work-related advice, but personal anecdotes and pearls of wisdom that came straight from their hearts. Through this co-op experience, I had the chance to develop both professionally and personally and because of this I am forever thankful to my supervisor and co-workers. Reaching out and taking the initiative to find my own co-op placement was an amazingly positive experience. I encourage all of you Communication Co-op students to try it! ◀

For more information on completing a self-directed co-op work term, please contact your co-op co-ordinators.

► **Top Co-op Employer...Continued from Page 2**

training mission. I even got to experience what it is like to be on the front line of a forest fire.

Needless to say, this job was an amazing experience. The Forest Service really gives students the chance to do all aspects of public relations. Though it can be stressful at times, you have the opportunity to learn quickly and there are endless opportunities to take on new projects and get the experience you want. All this brings me to my next piece of advice: apply for the BC Forest Service co-op job; it will be the highlight of your education! ◀



"Fire" taken by Corwin Odland, won honourable mention in the 2006 Co-op Photo Contest.

Exploring The Research Environment

► Debating working in a research setting? Read on

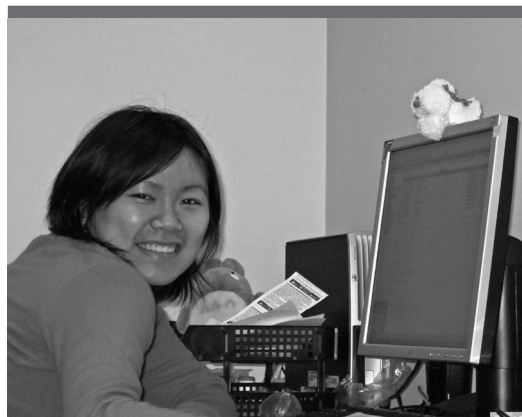
By Vicky Chan

When I told my friends I would be working as a research assistant at the Applied Communication + Technology (ACT) Lab last February, most of them fell silent. Those few who managed to voice their response had the following to say:

- Research? You read books all day?
- That sounds boring.
- I hear it's monotonous. You think you can handle it?
- Are you nuts, Vic?

None of my friends screamed out loud and then proceeded to hug me and tell me what a great opportunity I had just landed myself. I wonder why?

Granted, before I started working at ACT, I had reservations about working in a research setting as well. It sounded so routine, so passive, so...dull. Before ACT, I had had jobs as a communication assistant and program assistant. My friends label me as bubbly and extroverted, and I enjoy working in a fast-paced and lively environment. I had applied for the position thinking about how great an experience it would be for me in planning towards my graduate studies. At the same



Co-op student Vicky Chan enjoys the pace and environment that a research setting provides.

time, I wondered what the transition to working in a research setting would be like. Quite frankly, I, too, imagined working in a research environment to be rather repetitive and tedious.

My first week on the job, however, has thrown out all those doubts. No, I am not required to read books all day; no, it is not as boring and repetitive as my friends had said; and no, I have not gone off the deep end wondering how I will survive working in a research environment. Instead, I am more than surviving my work term – I rather enjoy the different pace and environment.

Despite the slower pace, the tasks I have to perform are far from boring. More and more, I start thinking of this placement at ACT as a window into the world of graduate studies. I get the chance to observe the graduate students working at ACT. I see them at their best (and their worst) as they tackle their research projects and graduate studies. I get invited into great discussion surrounding their research projects, their book projects, and several lectures and presentations. Not only have these unique experiences helped me in gaining knowledge in my chosen field of studies, they have shown me what it is like to be a graduate student, and proven to me that I am prepared for taking this next step in my academic career.

Of course, working in a research environment does entail the usual repetitive and tedious office duties. I have to make photocopies, fill out expense reports and keep track of inventories. Yet, working in a research environment is much more: it is about gaining different perspectives, exploring the unknown, and having fun. At ACT, I get to work with a group of enjoyable and sometimes quirky individuals who hold a passion for their studies and a great outlook on life. ◀

An International Perspective

► My journey with co-op

By Chisa Katsuki

When I registered for the co-op program, I didn't expect the process to be so meaningful and memorable. I knew how practical it was to have work experience when I graduated. What I didn't know was that finding what I really wanted to do in the future would take an intense search and some serious commitment.

My first semester with co-op was very common; I browsed endless job postings through PlacePro and other search engines until my eyes went blurry. I researched jobs available to communication students and found the competition amongst students to be much tougher than I had anticipated. Then, I realized what I needed was to narrow down what I really wanted to try. I needed experience in order to get to the next level and I needed it quickly.

I decided to volunteer for AIDS Vancouver, as I have been interested in the AIDS/HIV issue for quite some time. When I met with a volunteer coordinator, she quickly helped me find a suitable volunteer position. AIDS Vancouver has over 200 volunteers and the organization would not survive without their efforts. I have been helping with event planning and promoting since 2005 and recently, I received an internship position at the World AIDS Day event. My biggest reward out of this position was getting a scholarship to attend the International AIDS conference in Toronto this past year. I met people from all over the world and experienced an international conference for the first time. If I had not enrolled in the co-op program, I would not have thought about volunteering for a non-profit organization and I would have lost out on a life-changing experience.

Since I am an international student, competing in the communication field can be extremely challenging due to the language issue. To overcome this barrier, I decided to take part-time courses at BCIT to gain

more practical skills. I have a background in programming and the Internet fascinates me, so it was natural for me to take web technology courses. I contacted my previous boss who owns a web design firm in Japan and asked him if I could work for him while living in Vancouver. He liked the idea of having a Vancouver branch and this job became my first co-op work term! Thanks to technology, I was able to have discussion with my co-workers online and they could send me necessary information through e-mail, instant messenger, file transfer systems and internet phone systems. Half-way through my co-op term, I had a chance to visit them and work with them in-person.

Editor's Note

Chisa found her second co-op term and is now working in Mozambique for CUSO, where she's helping to develop a web site for a non-profit organization that supports people living with HIV/AIDS.



Co-op student Chisa Katsuki (middle, front row) surrounded by her co-workers.

School teaches me techniques and skills, but real work experience goes beyond what anyone can learn in a classroom. After my first work term was completed, I agreed to continue on with the company and I am currently creating a new web site and always challenging my own limitations. The process of finding a job and career has not been easy for me. Often I wanted to give up the search and concentrate on studying. However, looking back I am happy that I stuck it out because the end result was truly amazing. I am only half way through this journey but now I feel ready to take on any challenges that this co-op process might throw at me. ◀

Meet the Faculty: Richard Smith

► Richard Smith is brewing up our generation of 'The Borgs'

By Amara Der

Okay, I'm joking about 'The Borgs' (Resistance is Futile), but I'm serious about the technology part. This super-intellectual professor seems to have all the answers when it comes to metal or virtual stuff...

Who is this intriguing guy I see on a video blog? Oh no, it's Dr. Richard Smith. Not many students can expect a professor to be this open with technology, but with Dr. Smith, he will try anything – he may even let you text him during class (if he's up to paying for it). My first day with Dr. Smith came as a huge surprise. I assumed correctly that we would be discussing the growth of technology, but I didn't expect him to implement a majority of new technologies into our classroom. Some interesting tools he incorporates into the course are: elive, which is a virtual classroom where students can interact from home; podcasts, so we can listen or watch the lecture on the bus; and a class wiki that opens up the student web site for participation.

Though classroom technology may be new to students, Dr. Smith says, "I like to experiment with my classes. And because it's about new media, then doing new media experimentation is legitimate because as much as anything, students need to experience it and see it and really feel it." But before I continue to share his passion towards technology, let's step back to the 70s and strap on our hot pants, daisies, and bell-bottoms.

Once upon a time, a curious young boy was holding a toy phone in one hand and playing with an Apple computer at the same time. Reminiscing about his childhood, Dr. Smith recalls: "My interest in technology predates computers...but I had an interest in things and how they worked." Not only was he the kid with the cool mini-bike, but he was the kid who took it apart and used it against its ideological purpose.

A graduate in Communication from Carleton University, Dr. Smith then studied for his PhD at SFU. With an eye for technology, he remembers: "The professors that I worked for asked me to help them set up their computers. So I used to do that and then help them get connected to SFU's network, dialing directly to SFU, so you had to know what you were doing or it didn't work. I was the person that people asked for help."

How did he become such a cool teacher? Good question. He actually wasn't really planning on becoming a professor. Here is his story in a microchip: "I kind of thought I would be a lawyer but I ended up going to graduate school in Communication. I thought that I would work [for] the government or something...even while I was doing my PhD, I thought I would be a researcher or work in a company or for government. But then I started teaching and I liked it and [now] I wouldn't do anything else."

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Richard Smith is a publisher of the Canadian Journal of Communication and an associate professor in the School of Communication at SFU.

Where Are They Now?

Erin Bigelow

▶ Alumnus Erin Bigelow is big on co-op

By Jamie Frezell

What is one of the biggest benefits of doing co-op? Ask Erin Bigelow and she will quickly jump to tell you that “co-op offers students the rare opportunity to try out many different jobs.” The Communication and Sociology joint major graduated in 2003 with five work terms under her wing. She also happens to be a brilliant example of how one can utilize their co-op terms to the fullest and graduate knowing what kind of position suits them best.

“Co-op was part of the reason I came to SFU. I wanted to gain experience and apply what I was learning in school. The entire co-op process allowed me to graduate with confidence in my skill set and it completely fulfilled my goals and expectations.”

Erin began her co-op experience with the BC Restaurant and Food Association, focusing on event planning and administration support. This was Erin’s first office job and it acted as a stepping stone towards her desired career path. Her next co-op position led her to working for the provincial government as a Fire Information Officer, under the Ministry of Forests and Range. “My second co-op term sort of threw me into the deep end and challenged me in ways I never thought possible. I definitely learned a lot.”

After completing such an intense work term, Erin felt ready to take a stab at working for the federal government. She completed her third work term with Western Economic Diversification Canada and her fourth and fifth terms working in Ottawa, in a social policy position. Her final work term was sociology centered and very structured, which led her to realize she was more interested in communications and needed variety in her chosen career.



SFU Communication Co-op Alumnus, Erin Bigelow, is currently working as Marketing and Communications Manager with Hemmera.

“Trying out different jobs is so important for co-op students. You cannot just assume early on that you know exactly what you want to do. Try a variety of positions out and do as many as you possibly can.”

After graduating, Erin worked for Fuel Cells Canada, which focuses on alternative energy. This position helped her further her skill set needed for her current role as Marketing and Communications Manager, with Hemmera, a consulting company that provides service and expertise in environmental science, engineering and management. Erin fits perfectly with the firm, which is both environmentally responsible and community friendly. “At Hemmera, I am given the opportunity to have an impact and that is important to me.”

With so much work experience already under her belt, Erin has some wise words to share with current co-op students: “Always stay in touch with employers and colleagues. Take full advantage of the networks that co-op provides you with. Those are the people who have great experience in the field that you can learn from.” ◀

Editors:

Erika Wah
Marcia Shimizu
Jamie Frezell
Melissa Chungfat

Design & Layout:

Jane Nunnikhoven
Jamie Frezell

Contacts:

Melissa Chungfat
Project Assistant
MBC 1325
604-291-3505
mjchungf@sfu.ca

Sangita Mudaliar
Program Assistant
K 9665
604-291-5367
sangitam@sfu.ca

Marcia Shimizu
Co-op Coordinator
K 9669
604-291-3862
mshimizu@sfu.ca

Erika Wah
Co-op Coordinator
K 9661
604-291-5542
ewah@sfu.ca

We all know how awkward it is to see a professor out of school, but there is a good chance we may at least see Richard's name somewhere else. On top of teaching, he is a publisher for the *Canadian Journal of Communication* that "publishes perspectives on communication; a whole range...media, political economy, gender, advertising...from a scholarly perspective." Also, he has compiled a book, *Mobile and Wireless Communication*, with PhD student Gordon Gow, which is based on their distance education course books.

It is amazing how professors, like Richard Smith, can be so familiar with technology compared to students, like me, who have absolutely no clue. The terrible fact about my lack of knowledge is that I literally grew up with it. And yet, even with Richard's busy schedule - teaching, publishing, and writing - he doesn't seem to have the time to learn about every new toy coming out. However, there is no reason why he can't have a Second Life. ◀

Career Essentials

► **Five simple strategies to help you get ahead**

By: **Paula Scott, Program Manager of the Engineering Science Co-op Program at SFU, BA '02 in Communication**

Use your network and keep networking

Attend industry events, participate, and serve up what you have to offer. Remember, you never know who you're talking to and who they know. Find out. Ask for the business card. Get it started.

Always leave a good impression

It is important to leave a positive impression but what you do will not always please everyone all of the time. If you continue to leave the right impression, they will in turn continue to support you.

Look the part - it's your show!

How you present yourself to the people around you is extremely important. The more professional you come across when you walk into a room, the more credibility you will have amongst your peers.

Statistics Corner

Who we are:	06-3	05-3
New admits	30	28
Returning students	38	73
Total placements	65	101

Who's doing what:		
Eight-month term	19	18
First co-op	27	27
Second co-op	18	19
Third co-op	11	13
Fourth co-op	4	11
Fifth co-op	5	2
Part-time co-op	1	-
Self-directed co-op	9	8

Where we're working:		
Greater Vancouver	57	65
Out-of-town	5	4
Overseas	3	3

Who we're working for:		
Federal government	8	15
Provincial government	2	6
Municipal government	-	-
Government agencies	18	11
Not-for-profit	5	14
Private	32	26

Where else we're placed:		
Arts	5	8
Business	5	14
Computing Science	1	2
Science / Kinesiology	1	2

Follow up

Things get lost in the mix, you get busy...you think "Ah, what's one unanswered email?" That one unanswered email can be more damaging than you think. There will be times when you can't get to things as fast as you would like. Get to them. Follow-up instills trust.

Trust your gut

You know yourself better than anyone else, and if you don't, take some time to find out who you are and what you want out of this life and career. Your actions will cause the reaction. ◀