

Student Success Stories – Ruby Pearce Cabra College

Nevertheless, Ruby persisted to explore gender inequality in the medical industry.

Cabra College student, Ruby Pearce was one of the first students to participate in the initial pilot testing the new Activating Identities and Futures (AIF) subject, where her work in the new subject would contribute towards her SACE completion.

This optimistic and caring young woman is tuned into all things concerning social justice, with her interests spanning areas like environmental sustainability, climate change, animal and human rights, as well as the prevalence and impact of gender inequality and the way it affects careers.

When choosing her AIF topic, Ruby focused on exploring the impact of gender inequality in a career area she was interested in moving in to in the future – the medical industry. Ruby enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to stretch within this new subject.

“I felt a lot of personal attachment to my topic, and I had very high goals for myself, as in I knew going into the program that I really wanted to become the standard almost, just for personal goals, because it is such an amazing opportunity to have,” said Ruby.

“Like I have a good brain, so full with knowledge. So, I felt that there was a lot riding on it, and it was quite stressful. However, being able to take the creative approach, it contrasted to my other subjects where every student needs to write the same report. That’s where you’re allowed creative liberty, but within the aspects of having less scaffolding. Though it was difficult, it was very rewarding.”

Ruby valued how she could shape and direct her learning experience in the new subject.

“I felt that the student agency component allowed me to flourish, and that it genuinely felt significant and important to my future. I loved that there was a subject that was so strongly focused on that because I felt that every step of the way, every time I would sit down to do homework, I was investing in myself, becoming more aware of what may be to come,” said Ruby.

“So, it was just like, you are worth it, Ruby. Like, you can invest time into researching yourself, which then eventuated into a grade. But then I began to feel quite passionate about it.”

The new subjects provides opportunities for young people to understand themselves and explore their interests and open up the prospect for them to feel more confident about their future and to actively explore what it may hold.

“I know that almost all students who did partake in interviews and engaging in lots of primary research found that one of the main takeaways was an inherent sense of confidence that you can just reach out, because the worst they could say is no or not respond. And I learnt that if you convey you are a genuine person, there was a response for every email. I am not sure if it was because I seemed so overwhelmingly interested. Everyone is typically very open to discussions, especially in fields that are so specific. I’ve learned that you can reach out to anybody.”

AIF taps into the student’s best qualities, and the subject allows students to determine their outputs and how they deliver them. The new subject allowed all students an opportunity to shine.

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“It was quite empowering to see that you could still achieve high grades by being genuine and authentic. Even though initially it was hard to go down your own natural evidence pathway and be creative because we are used to just writing on a Word document. Everybody was appreciative of it and enjoyed seeing how creative we could be. I don’t know a single student who is not grateful for the opportunity. I liked having the environment of the classroom to walk into with all the natural evidence that you’ve collated and seeing my peers do it in different ways. Some people used a stereotypical Word document, some people had a big folder and then me using a OneNote and combining videos and photos, what to me felt like a whole mish mash of different formats. And just every individual being appreciated and encouraged to express their authenticity was something that I haven’t seen in any other subject,” said Ruby.

Finding an authentic method to gather natural evidence that was the best fit for her was key. As communication was her forte, using videos and voice memos worked out to be the most effective way to reflect upon her learning journey.

“With the portfolio, I went down the route of doing videos and voice memos and did reflections and analysed some of the sources in videos. I would just sit down in my room in the exact same spot each time, set it up and ended up with this quite extensive collection just sitting with a pencil, in my room. Even in my appraisal, rather than doing it in report style, which is what my two older brothers did because they did Research Project. I was really able to convey my personality and what my project meant to me through video, where you could see my face, and I could really just embed myself in each step,” said Ruby.

Connecting with mentors and communities formed a large part of Ruby’s AIF subject. Her teacher, Tracey Dorian encouraged her to be bold and contact leaders in the field. Following up on the suggestion, Ruby contacted the 2021 Young Australian of the Year Isabel Marshall, who also shared information and other contacts that helped with her topic. As Ruby persisted, more doors began to open with more contacts to follow up. The journey began to become even more interesting.

Ruby’s family is actively involved with volunteering within the community, and the skills and capabilities that she has developed as a volunteer for KIDS Foundation and Cool Beans Theatre were useful as she discussed the complexities around gender inequality within medical workplaces. Refining her communication style was important to get the best results.

“If you just ramble to these people who have gone through lots of stuff, then you’re not going to listen or be impactful. Sometimes I would overcompensate with words but didn’t really know what I was saying. Whereas I learned that just taking a minute and actively listening is something that can be a lot more meaningful. And it enriches me as well as the person who’s speaking to feel more valued.”

Ruby honed the ability to connect with her interview subjects as she progressed with her interviews. Often the journey took her to a place that she needed to go, even though she did not know that was what was needed at the start. By remaining open and flexible, her learning experience expanded.

“In my first few interviews where I really had no scaffolding, particularly on how it was going to go or questions that weren’t answered that I had wanted to be. I was like, I want to find out this today and it just went down a whole different route. For example, with my first interview with Marianne Moosa, who ended up becoming my mentor, it just became a scaffolding session on what my project could look like and what resources I could utilise, things like that. I learned to let go and appreciate the information. Maybe I didn’t get those questions answered but this relationship started being fostered and I have learnt all this other information.”

Ruby's chosen topic revealed challenging information along the way.

"Being able to delve into something about gender inequality but then to apply that to the medical industry, I was a bit overwhelmed with some of the information I was reading. So many people, even in the interviews, and they would probably say yes, at some point in their career, they have experienced it. And the information was a bit confronting. However, I did learn that to combat that, you just have to categorise the information, take the qualitative information and interpret and take what you can from it," said Ruby.

At times, the interview process opened up a greater awareness for those being interviewed about their own day-to-day reality.

"There was one really interesting experience where I felt really bad because I interviewed this doctor about her role as a General Practitioner and having children, and if that had influenced her career path. She was in the car on the way to pick up her kids when I interviewed her. And she was like, initially said, no, I haven't really experienced any gender inequality, like my life's been fabulous. I have a really good husband who has made it very easy. And then I got this quite long email from her after the interview. Where she said, actually I've had time to think about it and I've realised that there's been a multitude of times where the manager of my practice has said that he's not ever going to hire a female because they just leave to have babies. She's like, I would have never thought of that before the interview. So that was something she had come to realise, and that now she had, it was something she had to consider as it was still her current workplace."

These kinds of revelations did make Ruby consider if she still wanted to go into the medical industry if gender inequality was something that was so prevalent. Rather than letting it limit her, she decided that becoming a change-maker would be her focus.

"Exactly, that's how I learned who I want to be. And I kind of discovered ways of how all these established women I spoke with are already change-makers. How did they overcome it, how has that been their journey?"

Through these contacts there came a suggestion that Ruby attend Monash University to complete a PhD on the subject following the completion of a degree in medicine.

"These amazing, powerful women, they were so passionate to talk to me and through that I got so many contacts and even offers, from the woman who became my mentor and is a leading researcher in gender equality studies specifically in the medical industry. She was being very genuine, but I never would have anticipated that would come from the conversation. Obviously, it was very exhilarating to have that kind of connection, opening up to what the future might look like. And the recognition that I was not only on the right path, but I was understanding the information through the comments they made to me at the time. That was really affirming."

As she worked through completing AIF Ruby discovered more about building resilience in her learning journey by testing, failing and trying again.

"Something interesting that has come out of the past semester of learning is that failure and mistakes aren't necessarily, inherently bad. They're not a waste of time as I previously conceived them to be. With AIF I learned that there was a whole journey that I went down, like looking at male speech pathologists, and I thought there is actually an experience of gender inequality. Then I realised that I had wasted a whole week."

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This experience led to Ruby re-focusing on her core exploration of gender inequality for women in the medical industry.

“If you can, find lots of value and knowledge in the moments where you do make mistakes or go down the wrong path, because then I learnt how to analyse a source very well and find search engines to use that really gave me good archival sources. So, trying not to beat myself up over mistakes was something that I can now apply in a lot of areas.”

Ruby was open about the kind of advice and strategies she would suggest to students undertaking SACE.

“For me, communication with people in your community was very important. Letting my parents know, like, this week I’ve got to complete 5 sources and I have an exam. And if that’s why I am stressed and a little secluded, that’s why. There are often moments where you can feel quite beaten down by the amount of work and kind of feel like a cog in the system. But remind yourself of your value, if possible. I encourage everybody to find one person at least, either your parents, siblings, teacher or friend who will show you that you are a human and have value regardless of the grades.”