

CIL CAPSTONE

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Learning and culture are deeply intertwined concepts that implicate us in how we interact with the world. As a second-generation immigrant, I appreciate the nuance and precarity of navigating cultures. I inhabit a space between my Lebanese heritage and Canadian identity, and the comfort, accessibility, and relative value of this space constantly changes depending on my surroundings. Arguably, my capacity to recognize culture as a lived, active, and situational phenomenon and code-switch successfully has played a significant role in who I have become and what I have achieved today. Whether it's participating in the norms of Western education, like raising your hand to speak or mainly being silent in class, or engaging in practices at home that reflect my Arab heritage, like offering care and respect to guests via food or that loud, expressive talking is the hallmark of a full and happy home, achieving fluency in both domains was not easy. Even more, my faith permeates all aspects of my life, and Islamic values and practices find their way (intentionally and unintentionally) to infuse all my experiences. Thus, it is impossible to compartmentalize my lived experiences into separate cultures. A life-long journey of navigating spaces and code-switching initially piqued my interest in this certification program. However, new challenges and opportunities along the way opened my mind to new applications of this program's content. They forced me to consider how my future, as well as the future of those around me, will continue to be impacted by intercultural contact.

As a BEd. student, I had the opportunity to complete my first practicum experience during the Fall 2023 semester at a Catholic junior high school in north Edmonton. Although I finished junior high in the same district, I was shocked to see how diverse the student body has become. Luckily, my mentor teacher was also the EAL (English as an additional language) and FNMI (First Nations, Metis, and Inuit) consultant for the school. I gained insight into the complexities of tailoring education to meet each learner's needs. As classroom demographics

become increasingly diverse, approaching education through the lens of intercultural competency is needed now more than ever. Like everyone, students are a wealth of knowledge contributing to the classroom ecosystem. This can look like new customs, values, practices, languages, and beliefs. When we position students as experts in their lived experiences, we can create nurturing environments where they can thoughtfully and authentically contribute to the classroom as a whole. However, this relationship cannot exist without explicit awareness on the teacher's behalf.

One main takeaway from this certification I will implement in my classroom is the framework to ensure that diversity is the dominant culture (Malloy & Weigl, n.d.). Creating an environment through this lens means I will acknowledge and prioritize diversity as a pedagogy that I will reflect in decision-making, planning, and instruction. For example, I will embrace multiple perspectives and identities in my classroom resources and avoid singular narratives. By making opportunities for my students to engage in critical thinking skills, fostering a culturally responsive learning environment can be a joint effort within the classroom.

In one experience in my practicum, I was reminded of Hopper's (2014) article explored in the CIL orientation course on cultures, behaviors, and assumptions. In the last 15 minutes of the day, on a long Friday afternoon, my school conducted a fire alarm test. As standard practice, teachers weren't warned beforehand to ensure the test could reflect a real-life situation. So, as the alarm went off, chaos erupted—but our class knew what to do:

- Leave everything.
- Get up.
- Get in line.
- Get to the emergency exit.
- Go to the designated meeting area in the field.

However, one of our students, a recently arrived refugee from Rwanda, did not have the cultural background to understand what a fire alarm was, why it would be tested, or what to do. Instead, she heard a deafening noise and ran for the door in extreme fear. As a mediator in this situation, I tried my best to reassure her using words I knew she understood and ushered her toward the rest of the students to follow their lead. But, as she hadn't yet acquired the cultural capital gained by going through a Western education system (practicing alarm procedures multiple times a year), there was little time for learning in this high-emotion situation. Hooper (2014) articulates that 'orderly queuing is a Canadian tradition that may seem foreign to newcomers. While the need for order is not unique to Canada, how it is enacted in different situations is a cultural norm that is taken for granted as a natural part of life. Indeed, to some cultures, Canadian 'order' can seem like an unruly disorder. The main takeaway from this situation was the importance of perspective. What may be a regular occurrence to some may appear to be a life-and-death situation to others. While two or more people's perception of an event might not always be so extremely discrepant, it is essential to note that there *is* a difference, and approaching a situation with care and empathy can go a long way. This is a critical concept that I have taken from this certificate program that I will continue to reflect on in my professional practice.

Regardless of where my teaching career takes me, each school has its own unique culture, norms, and student body. Thankfully, I have the tools and frameworks to continue to support learners in different ways, and I am grateful for this certification course. Even after completing all of the prerequisite tasks, I left the final intercultural communication workshop with one lasting thought: I am still a learner, and each unique instance of intercultural contact must be approached with ease and goodwill. So, how do I keep learning? How do I make sure that this certification informs my practice? As English-language learners continue to enrich our

classrooms, I can't help but think about my experience learning another language for this certificate. As a student in one of the most prestigious universities in Canada, I struggled to learn basic vocabulary and grammar in French. Simple words and grammatical concepts escaped me, and although I knew I was a capable learner, I still struggled to comprehend and communicate. This experience helped me recognize my privilege as a fluent English speaker in Canada. Now, as a pre-service teacher in a school that sees an average of one new EAL/refugee student every two weeks, I empathize with each student who struggles to utilize their knowledge and cultural capital in a space that does not understand their lived experience. As I approach the completion of this certification and my B.Ed degree, I am grateful for the complexities embedded within/around cultures and the possibilities to decode new ways of thinking for myself and those around me. Still, I remind myself that I am a learner and that there is much to be learned.

References

- Hopper, T. (2014, Jul 25). Everyone line up: Canada's tradition of orderly queuing 'foreign and strange' to many newcomers. *National Post*. Retrieved from <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/everyone-line-up-canadas-tradition-of-orderly-queuing-foreign-and-strange-to-many-newcomers>.
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