

CIL Capstone: Now that it's done

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The first question that most people asked me after I finished working in Phnom Penh for 3 months was: “How was your trip?” I dread answering that question every time it’s asked because how can I possibly answer in only a few minutes? How do I explain that I am a completely different person now than I was when I left? How do I summarize everything I learned and everything I went through without trivializing those lessons and experiences? Every moment in Phnom Penh, from navigating the bustling streets to connecting with children in the orphanages, challenged me to rethink my assumptions, broaden my perspectives, and grow in ways I never imagined. The same goes for my years of learning French; each conversation, every cultural nuance I absorbed, and every opportunity I seized has contributed to shaping the person I am today. These experiences have not just expanded my worldview—they have become an integral part of who I am, influencing how I perceive the world and interact with others. So when someone asks me, “How was your trip?” it feels impossible to condense the depth of my journey into a simple response.

My CIL experience started in Kindergarten when I first started French Immersion. Of course, this was the choice of my parents and not of mine; however, I took this opportunity and did my best to use it in every way possible. When I was in Grade 10, I decided to partake in a 3-month exchange to Quebec City. When I first landed in Quebec, my mind was overwhelmed with thoughts that I wasn’t going to make it through the 3 months. I knew the challenges that awaited me and I didn’t believe enough in myself to think that I could overcome them. One of the biggest challenges was that the people there spoke much faster in French than what I was used to in class, so despite learning French for 11 years I felt isolated. I made it through the first few days purely because it had taken so much effort to get there, but I felt out of place and homesick. Understanding the language came with time, and once I was able to understand the

people around me everything seemed to change. Any other challenges I faced seemed more manageable (I had access to more resources and support), I made new friendships that have continued until today, and people I met started to trust me more. I learned more about the political views of the Quebecois and about their day to day lives, which was the first time I ever got that kind of information from people of another culture. By the end of the 3 months, I became more confident in my abilities to adapt to change and I got my first taste of what it was like to walk in the shoes of other people. I continued with French Immersion until I graduated. After I left for university, I continued practicing with my Quebecois friends and watching shows and movies in French. I didn't want to lose this skill, because being able to speak another language gave me the ability to interact with even more people around the world. I could use my French all over eastern Canada and in several countries in Europe (it turned out that I could use my French while in Cambodia, too). I developed a love for learning about people. I took GERM 111 in Berlin through e3 because of this. I knew that I wanted to participate in a Go Abroad program and the opportunity to learn a new language called to me. I found that I picked up the language easily and because I was in Berlin, I had ample opportunity to speak it with locals. The first thing I noticed about speaking German to the locals was that almost every person smiled when I tried talking to them and then would often try to talk more to me. These reactions showed me exactly how much easier it is for people to open up when they are in comfortable surroundings (like, for example, speaking their own language). I am now trying to learn Spanish and continue my Khmer and German.

After my experience in Berlin, I decided that I wanted to get involved in International Learning as much as I could so I started volunteering with EASI. Prior to this experience, I believed that the only way for me to increase my global awareness was by leaving my

community and seeing new places. As such, global awareness was not a priority for me while I was living in Edmonton. However, when I was working for EASI I got to see how many different cultures make up our University to a degree that I had not seen before. I saw that our school community had a variety of people that brought with them unique worldviews, ways of thinking, ways to problem-solve, and ways to interact and communicate with others. I feel like because of the above, I saw how interconnected our community is with the world, and I saw how beneficial it was to have different minds interacting together. I also got to meet students and university staff that had worked or studied abroad before and I got to hear about their experiences. I heard many stories from these people that were completely different from my experiences, which broadened my view of what was possible to see in this world. However, I also noticed that many of these stories reminded me of my times abroad, even if they went to different countries. This was the first time I started to understand that even though the world is big, it is still one world. I got a greater sense of this in Cambodia.

The PAW experience that took me to Cambodia was one of the most life-changing experiences I have gone through and I was able to bring everything I learned from my CIL journey along with me. Similar to when I landed in Quebec city, when I landed in Phnom Penh my head was filled with worry for all of the challenges I was about to face. When I saw the chaotic traffic and the wet markets I knew that this new place would bring about challenges that I had never faced before. However, rather than doubting that I was capable and regretting my decision to go (like in Quebec), I felt confident in myself that I could overcome whatever came at me. My experience with the exchange in grade 10 was a large contributor (simply knowing that 3 months is not that long in the grand scheme of things). Taking intercultural courses at the UofA (which enhanced my love for learning about people and new places), being a student in

Berlin (experiencing living amongst locals), and volunteering as an ambassador with EASI all also helped me prepare for this experience. Despite how prepared I felt going into this experience, I faced challenges and saw unexpected things that continuously pushed me out of my comfort zone. For example, nothing could have prepared me for the heat. I nearly passed out on day 2 and continued to struggle with it for 3 months. This was an abnormally hot year, and I saw that even the locals were struggling in the heat. I learned from some locals that the heat was destroying crops and affecting fishing, so not only were the people suffering physically from the heat but also financially. This in turn meant that less and less children could afford to go to school. I saw how interconnected global issues were to local issues. Another thing that I noticed was that as I started to get more comfortable in the city and started learning more of the language, the Khmer people started opening up to me more. I learned about the political situation in Cambodia first-hand from the locals and discovered how terrifying it is to live there because of the government. I saw the anger and the fear that the people hold. I also learned that the Khmer Rouge is what led to the situation as it is now. Because I tried making this city my new home, I learned more about the lives of the people here and the lasting impact of the Khmer Rouge than I would have had I closed myself off. Finally, as mentioned before, one of my biggest takeaways from my time in Phnom Penh was that we all belong to one world. When I was working with kids, I noticed that they were brutally honest, mocked our accents, laughed at silly faces, wanted to play on trampolines... all in very similar ways to how kids here act. I also noticed that younger generations often complained about the views and beliefs of older generations, which is also true in Canada. I was surprised at how much common ground I found with the people in Phnom Penh. The shared experiences, emotions, and aspirations I encountered bridged the gap between our cultures and reinforced the idea that, no matter where we come

from, we are all connected by our humanity. This realization deepened my sense of global citizenship and reaffirmed my commitment to fostering understanding and empathy across cultural divides. My time in Cambodia was a powerful reminder that while our challenges may differ in context, the underlying desires for safety, prosperity, and happiness are universal.

The interconnectedness of our world demands that we not only understand global issues but also appreciate the cultural dynamics of our local communities. My experiences in Phnom Penh, combined with my background in French Immersion and volunteering with the Go Abroad program, have deepened my understanding of these dynamics and highlighted the importance of cultural competence. I hope to continue to approach my work, school, and life with humility, empathy, and a commitment to building bridges across cultures. In doing so, I want to contribute to a more inclusive and interconnected world, and my time contributing towards a CIL has given me the skills to work towards this goal.