

Capstone Project

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Ever since I could remember, I have been surrounded by many cultures. Born in Lebanon to a Palestinian father and a Belarussian mother, I found myself immersed in at least three different cultures at once. At school, I spoke Arabic with my friends while we ate delicious manakeesh at lunch time. In class, we would study science and math in English. When I came home, I would sit down with my mom and watch television series broadcasted in Russian. Along with the multiplicity of languages, I was surrounded by many religions, learning not only about islam, but christianity from a very young age. At 10 years old, my family and I moved to Canada, and here I found myself exposed to even more cultures, languages, and worlds that I had not even considered before. Being surrounded by different cultures and beliefs never felt strange to me – the richness and diversity around me felt like home. And yet, despite having grown up in such environments, the Certificate in International learning taught me so many new things about other countries, cultures, and societies, as well as my own.

After having arrived in Canada, I seized every opportunity to learn more languages, histories and cultures from the people around me. That was until in 2020, the world was struck by a global pandemic that forced countries into lockdown. For over a year, my life became confined within the four walls of my room and the small neighborhood park. Like millions of others, I had to adjust to online courses and the isolation that came with them. During this time, I had to find different ways to satiate my hunger to learn about cultures. That was when I found the Certificate in International Learning.

As a Modern Languages & Cultural Studies (MLCS), and History of Art, Design & Visual Culture (HADVC) student, I have taken many courses relating to other cultures. Throughout my university degree, I have taken language courses in Korean, Russian and Spanish, delving into the cultures and histories of the countries that utilize these languages.

These courses not only taught me the grammatical systems of languages, but also through them I got the chance to learn about non-western histories and witness just how interconnected our world is. One such course that I took was MLCS 400 “The History of Translation,” where I learned about the House of Wisdom in Baghdad which operated during the Abbasid Caliphate between 750-1258 BCE. Knowledge and arts flourished during this period thanks to the fact that this place was open to scholars from various backgrounds and faiths. Scholars were able to compile, read and translate important texts while sharing their knowledge with each other. There, they studied everything from science and mathematics, to philosophy and history. What is not as well known is the fact that the European Renaissance is indebted to this era of the Islamic world and the Abbasid translation movement. The texts that were compiled and studied at the House of Wisdom were later translated in Toledo, Spain, and the knowledge gained from these texts eventually spread to the rest of Europe, which gave rise to the humanist philosophy that the Renaissance operated on. Despite this impressive fact that shows how interconnected our world is, and how the sharing of knowledge across cultures, societies, and languages is essential to global progress, I had never been taught this aspect of history before taking this course.

In love with cultures, I continued my journey with the exploration of Spanish language, Latin American culture, and history. I also delved into art from different places around the world, ranging from Latin America and Africa, to East Asia and Europe. In these HADVC, MLCS and SPAN courses, I was able to study the impact of colonialism in Latin America and Africa, where I explored how the exploitation of resources and political systems for the benefit of colonial powers still has lasting effects today. For example, I was able to research a South African photographer, Santu Mofokeng, and compare his photographs from before and after the apartheid in South Africa. Doing this research, I learned about how his art changed as he gained a freedom

that he did not have before, and I learned about the intricacies of collective memory and how change can be stressful, even if good. This understanding of colonial history was crucial in connecting the dots between past injustices and present-day global issues. Through this course, and many other CIL-approved courses, I was also able to learn about postcolonialist theories, and learn about marginalized histories outside of the Western canon.

However, as much as I loved to learn about the world through books and courses, I was also eager to learn through real, lived experience. This led me to do a study abroad semester at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in Spain. It was a transformative experience. It was challenging in many ways, but also rewarding in many more. This experience was crucial to putting theory into practice. During my time at the UAB, I was able to immerse myself and improve my understanding of the Spanish language, culture and society. I also had the opportunity to explore neighboring countries such as Morocco, Denmark, and France. This time abroad enriched my understanding of cultural nuances and expanded my worldview.

Although I believed that I was prepared to immerse myself in foreign cultures, the CIL orientation and intercultural relations training were crucial for the success of my experience. Through them, I came to understand the nuances of intercultural interactions and it taught me about the cultural stress that can come from living abroad for some time. It taught me how to understand myself and others, and it showed me how to navigate differences in order to build understanding and respectful relationships. There was one moment during my study abroad where the information I learned during the orientation was crucial. While I was in Spain, I was sharing an apartment with three other exchange students from various countries. This apartment was quite small and so was the kitchen space that we had in there. Personally, I enjoy cooking, however, I love doing it on my own when there is no one else occupying the space that I need. To

be respectful of my roommates' time, I always tried to cook during hours that I knew they wouldn't be using the kitchen. However, I noticed that one of my roommates always followed me to the kitchen and started observing my cooking, asking questions and making comments during this time. Although it was not disrespectful in any way, it felt stressful for me to share this time which I usually use to unwind and focus on the food. Thinking back to the CIL modules, I approached this issue by asking my roommate about her relationship with food and cooking, trying to learn about her culture and habits. What I realized was that in her point of view, she was being friendly and respectful by spending the cooking and eating time with me, because in her culture, it is always better to cook and eat together. This allowed me to reflect not only on her culture, but my own, as I thought about the habits that I grew up with and had grown accustomed to. This moment not only taught me the importance of intercultural communication and patience, but also the crucial mindset of taking the time to learn about why someone else is acting a certain way, before making a judgement about whether or not they are acting wrong.

I believe that CIL helped me become a more understanding, well-rounded person who is more resilient to the stress that comes with travelling and living abroad. It taught me how to approach visiting other countries to ensure that I remain respectful and understanding of the cultures that I expose myself to. It also opened new pathways and mindsets for me. While I used to find working and studying abroad quite intimidating, I now seek to gain more international experience and expand my world. CIL deepened my empathy for others, strengthened my critical thinking skills, and fueled my desire to make a positive impact. I discovered not only a renewed passion for learning but also a deep commitment to understanding the complexities of our interconnected world.