

From a Local to a Foreigner: My journey through transformative Intercultural experiences and my takeaways

As I sit here in Remedy, a coffee shop in Amiskwacîwâskahikan, also known as Edmonton, I take a moment to reflect on my surroundings. From where I sit, I can see the Garneau Theatre and a busy road filled with a rainbow of cars. Edmonton, located in Treaty 6 territory, has been the backdrop of my life for the past six years (give or take a covid year or two), shaping me from an intensely curious young student into someone who has undergone profound cultural exchanges, leaving a transformative impact on my life. However, for the last 11 months I have been away from this land, living and studying in Nantes, a city approximately three hours west of Paris. Despite already having a breadth of intercultural experiences under my belt, I believed I was well-prepared to face this new opportunity, thinking that European culture, particularly in France, would not be vastly different from my own Canadian upbringing. In this reflection, I will delve into three significant intercultural experiences, the lessons they taught me, and their profound transformative nature.

I was born and raised in Canada to a settler/ 2nd generation parents, spending my entire life in this country with the occasional road trip to the United States during my childhood. After high school, I embarked on my first solo European trip. Returning with a sense of superiority, I believed that I possessed a worldly understanding that my peers greatly lacked. However, my naivety and Westernized thinking soon became apparent when I realized that I had failed to truly understand the intricacies of other cultures and the global community. It was during my time in student residence (and throughout my academic career) that I had the fortunate opportunity to unpack these flawed notions. One particularly impactful experience took place four years after living in student residence building, where I shared an apartment in HUB (one of the most culturally diverse residences on campus) with two female roommates, one from Bangladesh and the other from the Ivory Coast. During an evening discussion about our love lives, I was captivated by the stark contrasts in our perspectives. Despite being women with shared hopes and dreams, our backgrounds and cultural upbringings shaped how we viewed the world. My Ivorian roommate's views on sex and marriage were vastly different from my own, which astonished me and vice versa. This evening left all three of us in tears of laughter as we unpacked and shared our preconceived notions and understandings on sex, romance, relationships etc. It made me realize that at the core, we all desire happiness, love, and meaningful connections in life. This experience taught me not to shy away from conversations that might seem inappropriate due to cultural stereotypes and to embrace the common humanity that binds us all together. I am deeply grateful to these roommates for opening their lives to me, as they helped me learn how to engage in discussions with a diverse group of people, fostering empathy and understanding.

After this year I returned home to Calgary, and due to the pandemic situation I was not able to continue in student residences. During this time, I auditioned for a theatre festival, an event that involved mass auditions for multiple shows. To my delight, I secured the role of Jocelyn in the play "Feast," written by Josh Languedoc. The play explored the complex relationship between an Indigenous man and a settler woman, and the entire process of preparing for the performance was intense and time-consuming. I found myself in a space focused on indigenous storytelling, I had the privilege of listening to and discussing Indigenous-settler divisions, understanding the repercussions of historical injustices, and conversing how our societies continue to navigate this intricate landscape. This experience opened my eyes, prompting me to critically examine my own colonial conceptions and the cultural biases I carried with me. Despite considering myself open-minded and accepting, I realized that my cultural background as a white individual had shaped my understanding of the world. While embracing this unique cultural experience, I learned the power of letting go of assumptions and being open to revisiting and revising my understanding of others in addition to being critical of my own opinions of how a society "should be or "should function".

Armed with the valuable lessons from my previous intercultural experiences, I believed I was well-prepared to face my most significant challenge yet. I decided to extend my graduation by a year and study in Nantes, France, a city with a population of about 300,000 located three hours west of Paris. Although I had matured over the last few years of my degree, developed friendships with people from diverse backgrounds, and had prior experiences in Europe, I wasn't wholly prepared for the coming year. My goal was to learn French and achieve full fluency, so I made a conscious effort to avoid contact with English-speaking individuals, particularly Erasmus students, who predominantly studied and socialized in English. The isolation I experienced during this period was overwhelming, making me feel more lonely than ever before. However, with time and determination, I slowly gained confidence and the ability to interact with others in French. As my language skills improved, I began to better understand the culture and history of France. For example, I noticed the prideful nature of the French extended into their language. For example the French have a dedicated ministry that regulates and ensures the high quality of French. Although I am cautious not to rely on cultural stereotypes, it was interesting to observe how certain French individuals would quickly correct my mistakes in conversations. The French language, owing to their colonial history, serves as a link that connects diverse territories worldwide. It was in these international spaces that I found myself, connecting with others through our shared language, French. In addition, I learnt how language can shape a culture. Even in the countries which share the same language e.g. French, that language is slightly different depending on where you go, in part acting as a representation of the cultural differences between these regions.

Summing up my intercultural experiences, I have come to recognize that to navigate intercultural interactions successfully, one must be willing to reflect on their own cultural lens and approach

others with an open mind and heart. Language, in particular, holds tremendous power in shaping culture and community dynamics. As I approach the end of my university degree, I find myself reflective and grateful for the opportunities I had to learn and grow. My year in France has only intensified my desire to continue exploring intercultural experiences and language learning. So much so I have opted to return there in the coming academic year, independently. Although I cannot predict the future entirely, I know that I have come a long way, and the certificate in intercultural experience has provided me with the essential tools, teachings, and firsthand experiences to work and live in international settings.

I must note that the transformative impact of my intercultural experiences was not solely due to the experiences themselves but was also influenced by the combination of coursework, training, and orientations that formed the basis of my learning journey. These components allowed me to view my experiences with a more nuanced lens, leading to deeper reflection and growth. In conclusion, my CIL experiences have taught me to approach my day-to-day activities with an open mind and heart, fostering connections and understanding across cultures. As I step into the next chapter of my life, I carry with me the valuable lessons from these intercultural encounters, knowing that they will continue to shape my personal and professional growth in the global community.