

**Certificate in International Learning (CIL) Capstone Project**

One of 8 Billion: Finding Myself in a Global Community

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## **One of 8 Billion: Finding Myself in a Global Community**

When I first joined the Certificate in International Learning (CIL) program, I had no idea just how transformative the journey would be. Initially, I enrolled hoping to enhance my understanding of international issues and become more globally aware, but what I gained went far beyond that. This program gave me opportunities to reflect, connect, grow, and see not just the world, but myself, from a new perspective. It helped me not only understand others better but also come to terms with who I am, as just one of over 8 billion people on this planet. Each component pushed me to rethink and reimagine my place in the world.

### **A Fresh Start**

One of the first highlights of my CIL journey was the orientation. It wasn't just about learning the structure of the certificate; it was about meeting the CIL staff and other students who, like me, were excited to learn from and with people from different cultures around the world. I felt welcomed right away and appreciated the friendly, open atmosphere. Here, what stood out most was the activity where we explored how the sound of a dog barking is expressed differently in various languages and countries. It was fun! Something so ordinary suddenly became a window into cultural diversity. That simple but creative activity reminded me that culture isn't always about big, abstract ideas; it's also in the everyday ways we communicate, laugh, and relate to one another.

### **Knowledge in Action**

I completed Intermediate Spanish I & II, as well as CHRTC 203: The Sociology of Christianity and CHRTC 241: Catholicism and Pop Culture as part of the CIL course requirements. These courses gave me valuable insights into the complexities of faith, identity, and culture across borders. Through Spanish, I discovered how language connects us to culture, and how hard but rewarding it is to learn a new one! Learning Spanish wasn't easy. There were moments of frustration, confusion, and feeling like I was just stuck, but the journey was fun and exciting! I love learning languages! It became more than just memorizing grammar; it became a way to think differently and connect with a whole new world. This passion for new languages also led me to study American Sign Language (ASL). That experience opened up an entirely new culture for me: the Deaf community. ASL wasn't just about hands and signs; it was about learning to see and appreciate language in a different way. I was fascinated to learn that sign language isn't universal; different countries have their own unique sign languages, each with distinct gestures, grammar, and cultural nuances. It's like discovering a whole world of languages within a world, a culture within a culture. Learning ASL was fun, educational, and deeply moving. It challenged the way I think about communication entirely- what we say, what we don't say, and what we express through movement, space, and emotion.

## **Reframing Faith**

Having been born and raised in the Philippines, where the majority of people are Roman Catholic Christians, I grew up surrounded by strong religious traditions. From a young age, I was taught about right and wrong, the importance of doing good, and the idea that living a virtuous life was the path to salvation. Religion was deeply woven into everyday life through prayer, ritual, and community. But as I navigated the religion courses in the CIL program, I began to see that Christianity (and religion in general) is far more complex than the ideas I grew up with. I realized that faith is not just a set of rules or traditions, but a vast and evolving system of meaning, shaped by culture, history, and interpretation. It's like sailing across a vast ocean: without careful reflection and guidance, it's easy to lose your way.

Along the way, I also discovered that Christianity is just one part of a much larger religious landscape. There are many other belief systems and religious affiliations around the world, each with its own practices, philosophies, and truths. I may not fully understand all of them, but I've come to recognize that they, too, deserve deep respect. Through this, I was reminded that global awareness isn't just about politics or economics, but also about the symbols, beliefs, and values that shape people's lives in powerful and personal ways.

## **My Intercultural Foundation: Life in the Philippines**

Before coming to Canada, I spent the first 19 years of my life in the Philippines. Growing up there and completing my education in Tagalog (my first language) shaped my values, communication style, and way of thinking. Filipino culture taught me the importance of hospitality, family, and resilience. These are lessons that still guide me today.

However, I also came with my own biases and assumptions. I realized through this program that while I thought I was open-minded, I still carried unconscious prejudices about other cultures. For example, I used to think that all "Western" cultures were individualistic and emotionally distant, but through conversations and friendships, I learned that this stereotype is both unfair and inaccurate. This recognition helped me start dismantling my own internal assumptions and encouraged me to approach new people with greater humility and curiosity.

## **Breaking Barriers**

One of the most powerful components of the CIL for me was the intercultural communication training. Meeting people from different parts of the world, listening to their stories, and learning directly from their experiences was inspiring. It wasn't just theory, it was real. Suddenly, "culture" wasn't an abstract idea. It had faces, names, histories, food, music, and values.

During one of the activities, we were asked to creatively express our identity. I chose to write a poem that captured who I was at that moment. I used the image of the sun, a direct reflection of

my name, Sun. The sun holds deep significance across many cultures. In some, it symbolizes hope and resilience; in others, power, clarity, or renewal. While its meaning may vary, the sun itself remains the same, shining brightly across borders. For me, the sun represents a shared symbol of strength and warmth, reminding us that no matter how different we may seem, we are united by our shared human experiences.

Here is the poem I wrote and shared during that session:

*I am Sun*

*I am the Sun rising from the East,  
Bright, warm and shining.*

*I am a mighty eagle,  
Soaring, flying freely in the sky.  
To leave quiet footprints in this world,  
In the corner,*

*Watching, learning, listening.  
Always on the move, ready for new adventures.*

*I am a son, a grandson, a brother, a friend, a seeker of stories, and the Sun.*

***I am what the world has made me become.***

This poem was a turning point in how I thought about identity. The final line, "*I am what the world has made me become*," reflects this idea that identity isn't static or individualistic. Instead, it is shaped by people, places, and experiences. Writing this poem helped me realize that I am a product of connection, of the cultures I've lived in, the stories I've heard, and the relationships I've built. The metaphor of the sun helped bring that message into focus.

This experience sparked something in me, and I decided to take it further. I joined the English Conversation Club at the University of Alberta. Here, we meet every Friday to talk, eat, laugh, and learn together. Through this club, I formed friendships, not just acquaintances, but real bonds with people from all over the world. We shared food and stories, opened up about the challenges we faced as international or culturally diverse students, supported each other, and built a small global community right on campus. That experience has been one of the highlights of my university life.

## **A New Lens on the World**

As I moved through the CIL program, my understanding of the world began to shift in meaningful ways. I started to see how deeply connected local and global issues are and how something that happens in one part of the world can ripple across borders and affect others in unexpected ways. More importantly, I learned that to truly understand these connections, we need to approach them with openness, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. Power, history, and

identity don't just influence large systems; they shape the way we speak to each other, work together, and make decisions in everyday life. Now more than ever, with everything that is happening around the world, from conflict and climate change to displacement and division, we need a deeper understanding, openness, and real connection. Like a family, we must learn to care for each other across borders.

What changed the most, though, was how I see and engage with people. I've learned that it's not enough to simply accept differences, but to genuinely walk alongside others, to listen with curiosity and learn without judgment. My world has expanded, not just in terms of knowledge, but in how I feel and think. I try to approach conversations more thoughtfully and lead with more empathy. The CIL wasn't just a checklist of experiences; it gave me a clearer sense of who I am and the kind of impact I want to have. It's shown me that my future lies in spaces where cultures meet, whether through education, development, or community work. Wherever life takes me next, the lessons from this journey will stay with me and help me grow.