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August 1, 2025

Certificate in International Learning Capstone Project

Reflections on My CIL Journey

When I enrolled in the Certificate in International Learning, I saw it as an opportunity to broaden my academic and professional skills, especially as a future teacher. I expected to learn more about global issues and intercultural communication, but I didn't anticipate how much it would challenge my assumptions and shift the way I approach unfamiliar situations. The combination of online modules, intercultural training, and especially my three-month internship at Paderborn University in Germany pushed me to think more critically about culture, connection, and education. This reflection explores the key moments that shaped my learning throughout the program: what I experienced, what surprised me, and how those experiences continue to inform how I move through the world.

Spending three months in Germany was my first time living abroad on my own. I interned full-time in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Paderborn, working closely with a professor in the English Language and Culture department. My research project focused on how English is taught and perceived in Germany, particularly within cultural and literary contexts with the emergence of AI technology in the classroom. At first, I was nervous about whether I'd be able to communicate effectively in a professional setting in a foreign country. I worried about making cultural missteps or struggling with the German bureaucracy. But to my surprise, many of these fears didn't materialize in the way I thought they would.

What surprised me most about studying abroad was how easy it was to connect with people, even when there were language or cultural differences. I was not sure what to expect, but what I found

from most of the Germans I met was curiosity and openness. Many of the German students I met were just as interested in learning about Canada as I was about Germany. We bonded over shared interests that transcend cultural barriers such as music, food, travel, and art. Even with the education students, I found we had many of the same concerns: classroom management, inclusive practices, dealing with burnout, and the evolving state of our respective education systems.

Living on campus in a student dormitory gave me a real taste of everyday German life. I had easy access to public transit, which I used to explore cities like Düsseldorf, Cologne, and Kassel. Each place had its own charm, but what stood out across the board was how much Germans value public space and tradition. The lush public parks were full during the day, festivals and holidays happened constantly, and people took the time to enjoy life communally. I always hear that Germans are so efficient and serious, and while that might be true in some contexts, I saw the part of the culture that values downtime, local pride, and spontaneous conversations over beer in the park. At the same time, some aspects of German life were more difficult to adjust to. Bureaucracy was frustrating and felt overwhelming at times. Things such as signing up for the health insurance company and waiting almost 3 weeks in order to get access to basic student services and public transport access was not pleasant to deal with. Overall, I learned to let go of control, ask for help, and have patience to be able to make it through those little problems.

The CIL orientation module was another part of this experience that has shifted my perspective. The online format was well-structured and thought-provoking, but what I appreciated most were the discussion forums. Reading about other students' experiences: what challenged them, what they noticed, how they changed made me reflect more critically on my own beliefs and assumptions. I realized how often I viewed culture from a distance, as something to observe rather than engage with.

One key moment from that module was when we were asked to reflect on our own cultural identity before learning about others. This was harder than I expected. I had always thought of myself as

being quite open-minded, but I hadn't fully confronted the discomfort that can come from not understanding someone else's perspective. I used to feel overwhelmed by the great number of diverse cultures in the world and how much I did not understand, but through CIL, I began to shift from needing to understand everything to simply being open to learning. That mindset gave me more peace and freedom to appreciate diversity rather than feel inadequate in the face of it.

A powerful part of my CIL journey was the Intercultural Communication training, which I took alongside other students in the program. What made it meaningful wasn't just the content, it was the connections I made with the people there. We didn't just sit through lectures; we engaged in deep conversations about identity, culture, misunderstanding, and connection. We shared stories, challenged assumptions, and found common ground. I especially liked how the course started with the self: Who are you? What has shaped you? How do you see things? These questions laid the groundwork for genuine connection because they helped us enter intercultural dialogue with more empathy and humility.

As a pre-service teacher in Alberta, my experience with the Certificate in International Learning has had a direct impact on how I see myself in the classroom. Alberta's classrooms are richly diverse, with students from countless linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The CIL gave me practical tools and more importantly, a mindset to connect with students in ways that honor their heritage and stories.

The CIL taught me that cultural learning doesn't only happen abroad, it happens everyday when we stay curious, listen deeply, and are willing to change in response to what we learn. I've started thinking more critically about how to bring global perspectives into local classrooms. That might look like using diverse texts and resources, incorporating global current events, and creating space for students to share their own cultural experiences as much as possible.

The CIL program also helped me develop my personal confidence. Living abroad, navigating unfamiliar systems, doing academic research in a different country are all experiences that made me

realize I'm capable of more than I thought. I've learned to embrace uncertainty, to stay flexible, and to find common ground with people who see the world differently. Those are skills I'll carry with me not just as a teacher, but as a person.

The Certificate in International Learning helped me connect global experiences to local contexts in a meaningful and practical way. From navigating life and work in Germany to engaging with peers in intercultural communication training, I developed skills and perspectives that directly apply to today's diverse classrooms. I gained more than just international experience, I learned how to reflect, adapt, and engage with cultural differences more thoughtfully. For future teachers and professionals working across cultures, the CIL offers more than a credential, it provides the tools to think critically about our roles in a globalized world and to respond with greater awareness and empathy.