

Capstone Project

Intercultural Communication & International Relations:
My journey while completing the Certificate in International
Learning

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Introduction: The Destination

As I pause my sluggish steps at the bottom of a steep hill, which appears to ascend into oblivion, bearing 30 lbs of weight on my exhausted body, I contemplate my final ascent towards my destination. I am in disbelief over surviving the last 24 hours. With a train debacle, a bus mishap, and no sleep, was it true that I had just gone through this ordeal? I had planned everything down to the minute to satisfy my anxieties about travelling in a foreign country. But my immaculately detailed plan fell apart under the pressure of reality - and Italian time management.

I reflected in that moment and wondered what my next two months in Cortona would be like. Would I make new friends? Hone my spoken Italian? Maintain my GPA while working and living in a different environment? Survive?! I was nervous because I had never studied abroad before or travelled solo outside of Canada. Looking back on my two-month experience, I realize the components I completed for the Certificate in International Learning set me up for success abroad. Suppose I had not learned the nuanced connections within and between Italian culture, history and language or completed intercultural communication training. In that case, I might still be stuck at the bottom of that hill, frozen at the threshold of the gates of Cortona.

My Journey Completing the Certificate in International Learning

My journey halfway across the world to study abroad did not begin when the WestJet flight landed on the ground in Rome, nor did it commence at the pre-departure session where 40+ undergrad students anxiously bounced their legs and muttered to themselves their excitement for the Spring 2023 semester in Italy. No, my journey began much earlier - back in September 2022, to be exact. I had just transferred to the University of Alberta, and everything was new and exciting: campus, people, opportunities, etc. I have always sought out opportunities to make my life interesting and enriching, and what better place to enrich one's life and portfolio than through the opportunities offered at university. Through one of these opportunities, I discovered the Certificate program in International Learning. After reading the certificate's description, I immediately saw the benefit it could have for me in my studies. Being an anthropology and history honours student with a deep love for travelling, culture, and communication, I knew I needed to complete this certificate.

I began my certificate journey with an online orientation where I met new people from all walks of life and cultural backgrounds. Through orientation, we shared our experiences of cultural contact, whether through travelling, family or moving abroad for school. We also learned about the components that define culture while highlighting culture's holistic presence in each of our lives. The valuable takeaway for me was learning about intercultural competency and helpful acronyms such as

D.I.V.E (Describe, Interpret, Verify, & Evaluate) to help us face culturally tense situations. I also found it informative to learn about theories surrounding the study of culture, which provided a great introduction to my cultural and linguistic anthropology courses I would be taking later. Overall, orientation gave me a greater appreciation for human diversity while preparing me for the different cultural contacts I would inevitably face both at home and abroad. It thus provided an insightful exercise to examine how I view myself, my culture and other people's culture.

From there, I went on to complete Intercultural Communication training, where I learned the rich, in-depth experiences one can have in another culture. I was taught what culture shock was, the different ways people communicate and express themselves as a cultural group, the formation of individualistic versus collectivist cultures, and how cultural signs manifest in unique ways. I became aware of the presence of cultural miscommunication, which came not from a lack of linguistic competence but from a lack of communicative competence. According to my linguistic anthropology professor (whose class I took at the same time I was completing my Intercultural Communication training), communicative competency is one's ability to use language effectively and appropriately in various social contexts and circumstances. It thus encompasses more than just grammatical knowledge, but also the social rules and conventions for communication. Without it, even a master scholar of a language would be lost in what was trying to be conveyed. It was thus through my linguistic anthropology class and Intercultural Communication training that I began to understand the nuanced connections which existed between language and culture.

Incorporating what I had learned from my Intercultural Communication training, I began to understand and grasp the international issue cultural miscommunication posed on policy creation, allyship, and relations. Since our own culture is normalized and embedded into our lives, we sometimes forget that other cultures have different systems and ways of existing and thus different cultural frameworks dictating the proper practice of politics, economy, and communication. This insight invited meaningful discussions among my peers, particularly in my Methodology, Theory and Practice of Classical Archaeology, and Social and Cultural Anthropology classes. For example, in one of my classes, there was a discussion about how translations done by digital systems are not always superior to human interpreters because digital systems cannot factor in the cultural nuances in people's actions and language. Thus, tensions from miscommunication or a misunderstanding could arise between nations.

One last element which particularly helped me in Italy was completing my Beginner's Italian class. Through this class, I continued to learn the interconnectedness between language and culture,

specifically within an Italian context. For example, I learned that there are regional dialects within Italy which formed through the mixture of different regional cultures from the surrounding area. Being aware of them and attempting to integrate them into your speech when residing in that region shows respect for the local people as well as demonstrates a genuine interest in cultural exchange. As well, I learned how to speak, listen, read, and write the national language. Although many people in Italy speak English to some degree, not having learned any of the national language, I believe, is an insult to Italians, as not attempting to learn their language but expecting them to know mine is selfish and ignorant for a global citizen.

Packing all this knowledge with me, I headed off to Italy. With the opportunity to live and learn in Cortona, it was my responsibility and honour to apply the skills I had acquired during my orientation, Intercultural Communication training, and anthropology, archaeology, and Italian classes. One of the biggest ways I applied my skills was in fostering relations with the locals. Recognizing that I was a mix of student, traveller, and ambassador to the University of Alberta, I cultivated close connections with local villagers and actively participated in respectful exchanges of culture and language, ensuring that friendly relations between the town and the university would endure. Learning the language and aspects of culture in Cortona helped to bridge the divide between me and others, and I was honoured to have fruitful conversations and debates about my understanding of their culture and their understanding of my culture. With the skills developed through the Certificate in International Learning, I managed to recognize and sidestep topics which were culturally sensitive and speak in a way which would be taken as curious and not condescending. It was from these encounters that I learned so much more about northern Italian culture as well as the locals' perspective on the Canadians studying there, who had been coming there for over a decade.

However, my biggest reflection from travelling abroad to study was how the skills learned from the Certificate in International Learning changed me as a person. As I continued to converse more with locals (demonstrating genuine interest in them, their family, and culture), I began to emerge out of my social shell of shyness and began to be more socially spontaneous with the locals and shopkeepers. All this occurred because of my anthropology and Italian courses and intercultural communication training, which gave me the confidence and skills to interact and create real social connections with people from different cultures and backgrounds. For example, through cultural exchanges, I learned how to refine my Italian pronunciation and developed new forms of communication through facial expressions and hand gestures. I also began to build friendships with

my fellow exchangees, who, although all coming from Alberta, were diverse themselves in cultural background.

Conclusion: The Importance of International learning

My academic experience abroad served me well, thanks in large part to the Certificate in International Learning. My biggest personal growth was overcoming social anxiety, mastering tenacity, enhancing communication skills, and broadening my academic studies. I can confidently say that this certificate unlocked new experiences, which have allowed me to consider different directions for completing my undergraduate degree. Since Cortona, I have completed Intermediate Italian, refining both my linguistic and communicative competence in the language, dived further into the study of cultural anthropology and archaeology, and have undergone another study abroad to Jordan to do archaeological surveying. Before starting the Certificate in International Learning, I saw my academics and career as a straight path that I could not stray from. Today, having completed all components of the certificate, I see my journey post-graduation as an unexpected steep climb, and as I stand at the bottom of the hill, I embrace the unexpected adventure that surely will come.

Intercultural Communication & International Relations: My Journey while Completing the Certificate in International Learning

Rachel Carroll
University of Alberta

Introduction: Standing at the Gates

As I pause my sluggish steps at the bottom of a steep hill, which appears to ascend into oblivion, bearing 30 lbs of weight on my exhausted body, I contemplate my final ascent towards my destination. I am in disbelief over surviving the last 24 hours. With a train debacle, a bus mishap, and no sleep, was it true that I had just gone through this ordeal? I had planned everything down to the minute to satisfy my anxieties about travelling in a foreign country. But my immaculately detailed



Fig.1. Group photo of Cortona Spring Term I students and professors

plan fell apart under the pressure of reality - and Italian time management. I reflected in that moment and wondered what my next two months in Cortona would be like. Would I make new friends? Hone my spoken Italian? Maintain my GPA while working and living in a different environment? Survive?! I was nervous because I had never studied abroad before or travelled solo outside of Canada. Looking back on my two-month experience, I realize the components I



Fig.2. Group photo of Cortona Spring Term II students and professors

completed for the Certificate in International Learning set me up for success abroad. Suppose I had not learned the nuanced connections within and between Italian culture and history, or completed intercultural communication training, or taken beginner's classes in Italian. In that case, I might still be stuck at the bottom of that hill, frozen at the threshold of the gates of Cortona. Thus, I owe my success abroad to the Certificate in International Learning.

Incorporating CIL Skills in Italy

Packing up all this knowledge with me, I headed off to Italy. With the opportunity to live and learn in Cortona, it was my responsibility and honour to apply the skills I had acquired during my orientation, Intercultural Communication training, and anthropology, archaeology, and Italian classes. One of the biggest ways I applied my skills was in fostering relations with the locals. Recognizing that I was a mix of student, traveller, and ambassador to the University of Alberta, I cultivated close connections with local villagers and actively participated in respectful exchanges of culture and language, ensuring that friendly relations between the town and the university would endure. Learning the language and aspects of culture in Cortona helped to bridge the divide between me and others, and I was honoured to have fruitful conversations and debates about my understanding of their culture and their understanding of my culture. With the skills developed through the Certificate in International Learning, I managed to recognize and sidestep topics which were culturally sensitive and speak in a way which would be taken as curious and not condescending. It was from these encounters that I learned so much more about northern Italian culture as well as the locals' perspective on the Canadians studying there, who had been coming there for over a decade.



Fig. 4. Left: View of Cortona and the valley;
Right: Photo of the bell tower at the civic center in Cortona

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Fig. 5. Left: Photo of the civic center on the last night of the Spring Term II;
Right: Myself with Professor Marko Pacioni

Conclusion: Being Transformed

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Fig. 6. My last cappuccino at my favourite café in Cortona

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Fig. 6. Top Left: View from the top western ridge overlooking the site of Humayma;
Top Right: Photo of my presentation of the Qasr al-Bint, Petra;
Bottom: Photo of students and professors from the 2025 Archaeological Field School - Jordan

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Fig. 3. Top: Photo of the Flower Festival and Market in Cortona;
Bottom Left: Image of Il Solco where students frequented;
Bottom Right: Photo of Franz, the manager of the hotel where we lived