

Capstone Project:

**“More Than a Certificate: How Learning to Listen
Changed the Way I See the World”**

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Before I clicked “apply” on this certificate, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. However, the Certificate in International Learning has been one of the most meaningful parts of my university experience. During the time I spent working towards this, there was not a single defining moment that I could point out that changed my intercultural competency. Instead, my growth happened slowly; across classrooms, volunteer spaces, language lessons, and moments where I felt unsure of myself. Over time, those experiences pushed me to rethink what I believed about culture, justice, communication, and my own place in these systems. Through my orientation, experiential learning, intercultural training, language study, and numerous courses that challenged my perception of the world, I developed a more nuanced understanding of global and local interconnectedness. This capstone reflects on how these experiences reshaped my understanding of culture, communication, and my future role in an interconnected world.

One of the most formative parts of this journey was my volunteer placement with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton in the Indigenous women’s program. Before this, most of what I knew about Indigenous issues came from the textbooks and lectures that I had been taught over the course of my life. I had studied post-colonial Canada, human rights, globalization, and governance – understanding the theories to a ‘T’. While this context was important, I noticed that the volunteer work I had completed grounded those ideas in real relationships and real stories. Sitting and reflecting in healing circles with Indigenous women, many of whom were navigating addiction or reintegration, required something different from in-classroom academic learning.

I remember sitting quietly in a healing circle at the Elizabeth Fry Society, unsure of what to say and slowly realizing that I did not need to say anything at all. I had to slow down. I had to listen without trying to analyze or fix anything. I had to let go of the comfort that comes with having “the right answer.” In those circles, storytelling was knowledge, healing, and resistance all at once. It was there, in my discomfort and ignorance, that I was able to grow the most in intercultural understanding. I began to understand relationality and accountability not as abstract concepts, but as lived values. These teachings stood in sharp contrast to the logic I had learned about in discussions of the Western criminal justice system. Hearing firsthand how intergenerational trauma, colonial violence, and systemic barriers shaped individual lives made those broader political systems feel immediate and personal. To me, justice stopped feeling like punishment and started to look more like restoration and healing.

My volunteer work also brought me into the Edmonton Remand Centre, where I helped facilitate programming rooted in the medicine wheel and Indigenous teachings through a program called “Well-Briety” – an Indigenous-rooted Addictions recovery aimed at healing incarcerated Indigenous women. Walking into a carceral space for the first time was uncomfortable and scary for me. Looking around the institution, I became significantly more aware of my own positionality and privilege as I was entering a space shaped by systems that have disproportionately harmed Indigenous communities. That reality forced me to think

carefully about how I showed up. I was also lucky enough to participate in smudging ceremonies and guided discussions, albeit, inside an institutional setting, which made the tension between Indigenous worldviews and Western systems visible. It was a vulnerable and emotional experience for all those involved, and I am so grateful that I was able to experience this ceremony both authentically and first-hand with those who had passed down those traditions for generations. That experience taught me that intercultural engagement is about mutual learning, respect, and recognizing your limits, and not simply just stepping up to help.

Language learning was another turning point for me. I completed a full year of introductory Japanese, which was my first time ever studying a second language. I definitely underestimated how challenging it would be. It was quite overwhelming when I realized that there are three different writing systems used in the Japanese language, which made this class seem extremely daunting. I still remember sitting in class, realizing the extent of this difficult language, and wondering if I had made a huge mistake. There were also many days when I dreaded speaking in class because I knew I would make mistakes or completely misunderstand the prompts. But, that vulnerability became one of the most valuable parts of the experience. The Japanese classroom was one of the most culturally diverse spaces I encountered during my degree. Students from numerous different backgrounds all shared the same beginner status, with everyone on their own path to understanding. We were all stumbling through pronunciation and grammar together, even when I thought I was always behind. That shared discomfort built a sense of community and empathy.

For the first time, I truly felt the cognitive and emotional labour of communicating in a non-dominant language. It gave me a deeper appreciation for newcomers and multilingual individuals who navigate English-dominant spaces every day; it is way harder than it looks. I also gained newfound confidence through that year: if I could survive the awkwardness of speaking imperfect Japanese, I could step into other unfamiliar environments too. Learning Japanese showed me how deeply language and culture are intertwined. Honorifics, indirect expressions, body language, and context-dependent communication reflect values around respect, hierarchy, and collectivism. These intricacies revealed a different way of relating to others across cultures. Most importantly, the experience taught me that growth often comes through discomfort and failure. That lesson now shapes how I approach challenges across the different aspects of my life.

My experiences were also shaped by the CIL-required EXT 300 course: Education Abroad – Global Perspectives. The course gave me the theoretical frameworks that were necessary to make sense of what I was already experiencing. Concepts like cultural self-awareness, power dynamics, empathy, and ethical responsibility helped me examine not only how I communicate, but how I am positioned within broader systems. For my final project, I explored how intercultural competencies would apply to a future career goal of mine to work as a

Foreign Services Officer with Global Affairs Canada. At first, I imagined diplomacy as primarily strategic and policy-driven. But through this project, I began to see how traits that I would never have thought of, like central listening, relationship-building, and humility are to effective international work – inspiring me to master these competencies for my future career goals. I also found myself grappling with harder questions: whose voices are represented in global decision-making? Who is left out? What does accountability look like in international spaces? Those questions don't have simple answers, but they continue to shape how I think about my future.

As a Political Science student completing a certificate in Globalization and Governance, many of my courses connected naturally with my CIL experiences. Studying human rights, immigration, post-colonial governance, and leadership reinforced what I was seeing outside the classroom. Global systems are not abstract; they shape local realities in concrete ways that I did not expect. What surprised me most is that some of my deepest international learning happened without even leaving Edmonton. Working with Indigenous communities showed me that colonialism, governance, and human rights are not distant global issues. Rather, they are present in local institutions and everyday lives. Being globally minded is not only about travelling and experiencing the world. It is more so about perspective, responsibility, and how we choose to engage with the communities around us – not always requiring a 'hop across the pond'.

I signed up for the Certificate in International Learning almost on a whim. At the time, I assumed it would be straightforward; just another set of courses to check off alongside my degree. I quickly realized it wasn't that simple – unlike other embedded certificates, this one asked more of me. It brought together volunteering, language learning, reflection, and coursework in a way that pushed me beyond my comfort zone. What I expected to be an add-on became one of the most meaningful parts of my degree. It deepened my interest in international studies and gave me practical experience I can carry into a future career in international fields – with a certification that will definitely be highlighted on my resume!

This certificate has changed how I see myself: I am more comfortable sitting with discomfort, I listen more carefully, I question systems I once accepted without much thought, and I have a stronger sense of responsibility and a clearer sense of purpose. Out of the countless lessons that I have carried throughout this experience, there is certainly one that I will carry forward: intercultural learning is a forever ongoing process asking for humility, curiosity, and courage. That is the mindset I hope to bring into my future roles and into the relationships I build along the way.