

Certificate in International Learning — Capstone Project
Where Worlds Meet: Learning to Stand in the Space Between

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Have any of you seen that one meme? Or maybe it was a TikTok. It starts out comparing how Americans and Japanese people say hello. In the U.S., it's a firm handshake. In Japan, it's a bow. Then the video takes a hilarious turn. Both the American and Japanese person try to show respect to each other using their own custom, and it ends with the Japanese person getting smacked in the face by the American's hand, who was just trying to initiate a handshake.

As funny as it is, that video stuck with me because it reflects something very real. Two people, both acting out of respect, end up in a moment of awkwardness, not because either of them is wrong, but because they're approaching the same value from completely different cultural frameworks. It felt exactly like that during my recent field placement.

I come from a south asian household where respect is non-negotiable and is ingrained in the way we speak, interact, and even exit a room. Every older person is an *uncle* or *auntie*, not a *Mr.* or *Mrs.*, whether we're related or not. Using a first name? That was only for younger siblings or best friends. In my world, the name comes with a title and the title comes with honor. Addressing someone older without a title is considered far too casual and borderline disrespectful. It's just not something we do. So when I started my placement at a corporate office, where everyone addressed each other casually by first name, regardless of age or position, I felt like I'd entered an alternate universe.

I had taken a leadership course at the University of Alberta the year before, where we learned about "high power distance" versus "low power distance" societies. It made sense in theory: high power distance cultures value hierarchy and visible signs of respect, while low power distance cultures prefer informality and equality. But theory and lived experience are two very different things. Theory doesn't always translate to real life and no amount of coursework could have prepared me for how internally disoriented I'd feel trying to navigate a culture where hierarchy seemed almost invisible.

In my field placement, everyone was "equal." The boss was just another team member. People casually referred to one another by first names, including senior staff and those much older than me. I remember feeling like I was constantly on the verge of being disrespectful, even though I was just trying to adapt. Saying someone's first name, especially someone in their 50s or 60s, felt too personal, too informal. I'd never even called my own parents' friends by their first names. To be honest, I just couldn't do it. I avoided saying their names altogether. Instead, I'd wait until I had full eye contact and clear, open body language from the person before speaking. Essentially, I was trying to get their attention without ever having to say their name. And it's only now, as I sit and reflect on that experience, that I realize that for the entire duration of my placement, I never once directly addressed most of my colleagues by name. Everything else, conversations, collaboration, the actual work went smoothly. But that small, seemingly simple act of calling someone by their first name? That was the hardest part.

At the time, I framed it in my mind as being polite or just erring on the side of caution. But I now think it was more so a sense of cultural conditioning. I had internalized a way of showing respect that was so deeply rooted in how I was raised that going against it didn't just feel uncomfortable, it felt wrong.

That said, I'm learning. In my current workplace, I've gradually grown more comfortable using first names. It doesn't always feel second nature yet, but it no longer feels like I'm crossing a line. It feels like I'm adapting and expanding on how I show respect in different cultural settings. And that, to me, feels like growth.

This same tension between instinct and environment showed up in other, smaller moments too. My very first day at that placement, during orientation, I shadowed my supervisor as she introduced me to everyone on the floor. We'd approach a team member, exchange greetings, chat briefly, and just as the conversation ended, I instinctively dipped into a small bow. It wasn't exaggerated or theatrical, it was just a slight, polite nod to show respect. And each time, the other person would hesitate, just slightly. A flash of uncertainty in their eyes. Should they bow back? Nod? Say something? It wasn't until the third or fourth introduction that I caught myself hesitating. Should I bow or not? That pause made me realize how easily habits become visible when they are outside their usual environment.

What struck me afterward was that no one really said anything about it. No one corrected me, no one questioned me, and no one tried to make it into something bigger than it was. Even the puzzled looks people gave me weren't rude or mocking. They weren't making fun of me or dismissing it, they just didn't quite know what to do. I like to believe it as a learning experience on both ends. I was learning how to adjust my instinct to fit the environment and they were learning how to respond to something outside their norm. This learning experience also made me realize that cultural differences don't always have to spark conflict or explanation. It's enough for both sides to simply recognize what's happening and allow space for it to exist.

While researching capstone project examples to help prepare for my own, I came across a story that perfectly captured this realization. A student shared an anecdote about peeling oranges. One day, her roommate saw her peeling an orange and said, "Why are you peeling it like that?" Surprised, the student asked what she meant. Her roommate then demonstrated her own method of peeling, which was completely different but equally effective. The takeaway was simple: we all peel oranges differently, and yet we all get to the fruit inside. That doesn't make one way better or worse, it just makes them different.

That metaphor stayed with me. It reminded me that cultural differences are often subtle and invisible until someone points them out. We become so used to "our way" that we don't even realize there *are* other ways. We all have our default ways of doing things, shaped by our upbringing, community, and values. But when we encounter someone else's "default," it can feel disorienting. But the goal is the same. Whether we bow or shake hands, call someone "auntie"

or by their first name, we are all trying to communicate, to connect, and to show respect. We're just peeling the orange our own way.

This realization hit again when I met my friend's parents for the first time. She introduced them by saying, "This is my mom, [first name], and this is my dad, [first name]." I was stunned. I had never heard someone refer to their parents by their first names out loud, certainly not in their presence. I expected her parents to be uncomfortable, even offended. Out of sheer curiosity, I peeked at her parents' faces. Would they raise an eyebrow? Scold her later? Nothing. They just smiled and nodded. No trace of disrespect. That's when it clicked: for them, this was normal. Calling them by their names wasn't dishonoring, it was just identity.

What I had been taught to view as disrespectful was completely normal and acceptable in another context. My assumptions weren't universal. And not everything I label as "respect" is the only form of respect. My friend wasn't being rude, she was just peeling the orange her way. She was just communicating in a way that fit her cultural upbringing. This moment, like the orange story, reaffirmed that there isn't one universal way to show love, respect, or familiarity. Culture defines how we express these values, and sometimes our differences can look like misunderstandings when really, we're all reaching for the same thing.

These experiences, alongside courses, intercultural training, and co-curricular activities, have helped shape the way I understand cultural intelligence. It's about being open. It's the ability to sit in the tension of difference without rushing to resolve it. It's about paying attention to the little things that feel "off," and asking, "Why do I think this is strange?" and "Could there be another way rather than my way?" It's learning to recognize that discomfort is often just the feeling of two worlds meeting. And instead of choosing one or the other, it's about learning to stand at that intersection, where unfamiliarity and understanding can coexist, and where growth often begins.