

Capstone Project

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The Certificate in International Learning (CIL) was an enriching experience during my time at the University of Alberta, which is soon coming to a close. I have been steadily fulfilling the requirements over the years and have developed a greater appreciation for the differences between cultures. I believe that learning about these differences and respecting them is a path towards becoming a more empathic and understanding person. We are experiencing such turbulent times, and empathy for others is immensely important to carry us through. Each aspect of the CIL helped to open my mind: studying Cree for a year gave me a deeper understanding of Cree Culture in Alberta; taking classes that orient environmental issues from an Indigenous perspective has broadened my thinking; my exchange was an enormously impactful life experience that changed my attitude on everyday life permanently; and the intercultural communication training has very applicable teachings. In this Capstone essay, I will tell the story of my CIL experience and how it shaped the student and global citizen I am today.

As a student pursuing a combined degree in Environmental Science and Native Studies, many of the required courses for this certificate overlapped with the courses I needed to gain credit for my BA in Native Studies. I chose to do a combined degree and incorporate Native Studies into my education because I believe how Canada, as a government and society, treats its Indigenous Peoples is *the* largest problem in our country. As a settler who resides on stolen land, I firmly believe that it is my own responsibility to educate myself on the historic and contemporary issues Indigenous Peoples face. Asking a marginalized group to take responsibility for your ignorance is not productive. I felt it was necessary to build a strong foundation of education on Indigenous Peoples, their knowledge systems, their successes and their contemporary challenges, so that I can ethically engage in kinship relationships with them and with the land.

Some of the courses that I took for this degree and for the CIL include: Introduction to Indigenous Legal Issues, Perspectives on Traditional Knowledge, Introduction to Research and Inquiry in Indigenous Studies, and Indigenous Foundations for Environmental and Conservation Sciences. These courses have provided wonderful insight into Indigenous cultures. One of the most impactful courses I took was NS 290: Introduction to Research and Inquiry, where we learnt how to conduct research according to an Indigenous worldview. The focus of this course was on how to shift from creating research *on* Indigenous Peoples to creating research that *serves* Indigenous Peoples. I remember one lesson in this course was to wait to develop your research question until you've had the chance to meet with the Indigenous community you are hoping to conduct research with and ask them what *they* would like to study. What questions would the community like answered? How can you conduct your research to make *their* life better?

Before this class, as a student also studying Environmental Science, the scientific method was etched into my brain. To successfully engage with the scientific method, you must start with a strong hypothesis/research question. But this course challenged that concept and offered an alternative way of thinking. A more relational approach to research would be to collaborate with the community to develop your research question, and this might mean adapting it along the way, or completely abandoning the topic you wanted to study, for a topic that *needed* to be studied. You don't have this insight until you've been in community and have built connections.

This is just one example of how my Western viewpoint was challenged by an Indigenous framework, and I discovered an alternative way of thinking. I believe the purpose of a university is to open your mind, challenge your perspectives, and improve your abilities. Incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, frameworks, and worldviews into my learning has checked all

those boxes. It will make me a better environmental scientist, Canadian citizen, and kin to all my relations.

Languages are windows into culture. By learning a different language, you are learning a different way of thinking. Studying Cree, this was very evident. Cree is *very* different from English or French (another language I have studied) and requires you to alter your thinking to create sentences, describe experiences, and carry a conversation. Cree is a beautiful language, and it can be hard to translate into English at times, because the worldviews behind both languages are so vastly different. For example, all the months in Cree are descriptions. ‘April’ in Cree Y dialect is *ayikipîsim*, meaning Frog Moon. Cree people chose to name different times of the year based on animals, which reflects their core belief of relationality with other non-human animals. Learning Cree put me into a different mindset, and it was a wonderful way to experience and understand their culture.

The highlight of my CIL experience was my 5-month exchange to Lille, France. I wanted time to switch from being a tourist to being a resident, and time to fully engage with different aspects of French culture. I remember one of my friends from class brought me to a birthday party, and everyone I met there greeted me with two kisses on either cheek. I was *so* happy to be included in this cultural greeting, and pleasantly surprised, because I wasn’t sure that was how French people *actually* greeted one another. Meeting locals from Lille and exchanging stories about our similar experiences, which took place on opposite sides of the world, was fascinating to me.

Another learning experience from my exchange was that the French people *loved* to sit and chat. I moved there in January, and even in the chilly weather, patios would be packed with people from 5pm onwards. They would be having a beer or a glass of wine, taking a smoke, and

just chatting. Leisure time was prioritized more than it is here in Canada, which is something I deeply appreciate about French culture. I had a French tutor to help me learn the language, and we would meet one-on-one about once a week. During our lessons, we would go to the pub and get a drink, and she'd ask me if I'd met any cute boys yet. It was culturally appropriate to meet in a friendly atmosphere and try to turn an academic obligation into an enjoyable evening. Life is meant to be enjoyed. I think most people in Canada would agree with that statement, but French people are truly taking it to heart. I have so many stories that I share with my family and friends that belabour this point. It was such a joy to experience this different culture and meet new friends who were so willing to introduce me to their world.

The intercultural communication training was an informative and fun evening, where I got to learn additional strategies on how to effectively communicate across cultures. The section on code switching especially stood out to me. Code switching is the practice of moving between different cultural groups, languages, or social expectations, depending on the context. It is a useful skill to use when navigating different cultural environments. Understanding that this is a practice some individuals have to engage with in their daily lives increases empathy towards others, because it makes us consider the pressures that people are faced with that influence how they speak and present themselves. Although this is a useful skill, it can also be challenging and emotionally draining. Being aware of this practice and using it can support more respectful and effective interactions, because it acknowledges that communication styles are shaped by cultural experiences and social contexts.

And lastly, I appreciated the CIL orientation experience because it provided an opportunity to connect with other students who have had similar experiences. This created a sense of community, despite it being an online course. I took the time to read everyone's

discussion posts on why they were pursuing the CIL, and it was interesting to read about the wide variety of international experiences that are offered to students at the University of Alberta.

Overall, the CIL brought together my academic studies, language learning, intercultural training, and exchange experience to deepen my understanding of culture and communication. Through Indigenous studies, learning Cree, and living in France, I developed a greater appreciation for different worldviews and the importance of empathy and respect across cultures. These experiences challenged my perspectives and helped shape the way I think about community, research, and everyday life. Completing the CIL has been a meaningful part of my university journey and one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.