

Capstone Project: A Chapter of Cultural Growth

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March 1, 2024

Word Count: 1496

Introduction: The CIL Experience

Saying that I have a Certificate in International Learning sounds funny to me because it makes me sound like I'm a qualified professional in unbiased international interactions. In reality, the CIL actually helped me recognize that I had way more cultural bias than I thought. After taking multiple CIL-qualified courses, completing cultural training modules and sessions, as well as having the opportunity to study abroad for 2 months, I can confidently say that I know very little about the world, but that is more exciting than discouraging. It means that there is so much to discover and admire, connect with and fight for. With my CIL experiences, I have developed a passion for cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication. I have a new desire to engage in conversations to cultivate a more respectful global community. Most of all, I feel empowered to seek answers to questions while staying true to my own cultural values - and also better define what my values truly are. So while I am no professional, I have learned a lot, and I am excited to share a few stories and takeaways that I've had the pleasure of gaining through CIL (a certificate I highly recommend to anyone interested in an adventure of cultural thought and growth).

Coursework & Background Information

I completed 5/6 of my CIL and second language courses before my experiential learning abroad. Each CIL course helped me develop a base level understanding of how different countries can intrinsically be. BUEC 342 helped me understand social structure; that the degree to which the basic unit of social organization is the individual, as opposed to the group, really affects a culture's values, power dynamics, and standard for conduct (e.g. a central value for Asian cultures is group membership). MARK 442 detailed how countries make strategic choices to elevate their attractiveness for international business, expansion and investment opportunities. In my B LAW 442 class, we compared common law, civil law, and theocratic legal systems and how they can influence how a country regulates their economy (e.g. controlling competition, protecting national resources or specific cultural, religious, and ethical views). Overall, the courses deepened my understanding of how individuals perceive decisions differently based on their background of values and expectations.

My personal background is as follows. I was born and raised in Canada by Chinese immigrant parents. I have had the opportunity to visit China several times, explore Cuba, and be a part of a 2-week mission trip in Guatemala. I grew up speaking English and Mandarin, while learning French and Spanish in school. In my free time, I enjoyed learning to cook different cultural foods and spending time with my diverse community of friends. All this being said, I felt like I had a very rich collection of cultural stories and insights growing up.

When I applied to study abroad in South Korea, I wasn't concerned about culture shock as I had been a close follower of Korea's Hallyu entertainment (movies, dramas, music, reality shows, etc.) since junior high. My closest friends throughout childhood were Korean so I grew

up around shows like Running Man instead of the Simpsons, and listening to bands like Girl's Generation instead of 5 Seconds of Summer. Because of my Korean friends and interest in K-entertainment, I ended up consuming a lot of Korean content ranging from happy variety shows to blood-curling news. I had a clear understanding that the Hallyu industry wasn't flawless, and as much as I was still impressed by the creativity and aesthetics of K-entertainment, I began to develop a negative view around the ethics of the idol industry. This view continued to simmer as I approached the date of my exchange in South Korea and I was passive in addressing it.

Experiential Learning: Studying Abroad

I went to study at Yonsei University with a clear goal: to improve my design skills. I took the Introduction to Computer Graphics course and K-Wave in International Consumer Insight course. The K-Wave course is the one that started reshaping my negative conception around K-entertainment. Dr. Ham explained that the success of Hallyu entertainment and exports was not an accident, but a byproduct of South Korea's rag-to-riches strategy in the 1960s. From a war-torn, impoverished nation to one of the world's leading industrialized economies, Park Chung-Hee's regime of industrialization changed the landscape. I learned that the boom of the entertainment industry was something that Korea coined as an economic miracle and that they continue to grow the industry as a national symbol of their success.

Amongst my many activities, I went to a place called HiKR Ground because I heard they had full-size set designs of music videos that you could tour for free. It was at HiKR Ground that I realized how much the Korean community valued creating entertainment. On the second floor of HiKR was the XR Live Studio, which was just rooms upon rooms of mesmerizing art work, movie-like set designs, 50-ft wide performance stages with floor to ceiling digital screen backdrops, and more. In each of these rooms, you could select a certain K-pop song to play over the speakers and essentially film your own music video by dancing or acting in the space. There were visitors and performers lined up outside every room, waiting for their turn to use the space. A majority of the people using the space on the day I went were young girls and boys who appeared to be under 13 years old. I watched as parents filmed multiple takes of their kids dancing in the studios. Some were filming Tik Toks, and some were using their cameras. The kids dancing seemed professional, instructing their parents on which angles to get and getting into position as if they were competing on a dance show. Needless to say, I was shocked, impressed, and in awe of the dedication people had to this space and their performance.

I realized that the K-entertainment industry was more than I thought it was. Before coming to Korea, I thought that the system was forcing people to pursue the entertainment spotlight. However, visiting places like HiKR made me realize that content creation and being in the spotlight for things like acting, dance, and performance was something the community really took pride in. My perspective of the industry completely changed as I saw it come alive in front of me. I realized that I was caught up in theoretical understandings of what the culture was like

and projecting my own Western judgment on a culture that I did not fully understand. Seeing the effort, teamwork, dedication and passion that the community had for entertainment (and having a newfound appreciation for its historical roots) helped me see the real positive impact it had on their society.

Intercultural Training: Unity

I took the intercultural training one month after I returned from my summer exchange. It ended up being an extremely impactful conclusion to my learning experience because the session was so conversationally active. On the day of training, 20 trainees entered the room. We were all complete strangers with varying ethnicities. Maybe it was the safe space or maybe it was everyone's post-exchange sentimentality and excitement to share, but within 30 minutes, everyone was in deep conversation about personal values, upbringings, newfound goals, and even traumatic cultural experiences.

One key memory was my connection with a girl I'll refer to as "Sally." At the start of training, Sally was one of the students that I thought I was least similar to because of her brief self-introduction. Compared to the other students, our hobbies and activities in life were the least similar. However, towards the end of the session, the instructor had us all do the DISC assessment (William Moulton Marston's DISC theory) and determine our primary personality types. When everyone revealed their results, my score and Sally's score were identical. I had the opportunity to talk to Sally as the session came to a close and was shocked at how similar we were in values, reactions, and communication. It was a heartwarming experience that made me realize how detrimental unconscious bias can be. It's so easy to judge before listening or conclude before understanding. Intercultural training taught me that meaningful connections are formed when you actively inquire and listen. It reminded me that it's good to keep context in mind but not to use context alone to determine an end result.

Overall, I felt so thankful for the openness everyone had and the intentional effort everyone was making to learn about each other's differences. The session was so productive it made me wonder what the potential for unity would be if this type of "speaking to understand" attitude for conversation permeated more regularly through communities in society. Moving forward, I want to cultivate environments where people feel safe to learn, because learning builds excitement, excitement leads to sharing, sharing fosters respect and safety, and that leads us back to learning all over again!