

Certificate of International Learning Capstone Project

Jenikka Kirkland

University of Alberta

July 7th, 2024

Throughout my journey completing the certificate in international learning (CIL) I have had the opportunity to attend the online CIL orientation, attend a variety of events from different cultural backgrounds, take courses in the field of cultural studies and study abroad in Reykjavik, Iceland. Each of these unique experiences taught me more about myself and the way I view the world around me. One of the greatest takeaways from this experience was the importance of oral culture and information transmission. This factor was a theme throughout my university career and may have played a role in my transfer from mathematics to the humanities as I find oral storytelling one of the most compelling ways to learn and understand complex material.

The first step I took after enrolling in the CIL program was to complete the orientation. The orientation allowed me to prepare myself for the rest of the certificate and I found many of the videos informative and helpful. I was unlucky to join in the middle of a semester and thus did not attend the CIL meet and greet, which ended up being a major regret of mine. Though I had the opportunity to attend later meet and greets, they always aligned unfortunately with my personal schedule, and I continually missed out. The online forums of the orientation allowed me to get to know a few select people and express myself in response to the prompts, but I feel the human connection of the meet and greet would have been much more fruitful.

To fulfill the co-curricular requirement, I opted to attend CIL approved events and ultimately chose to attend a variety of films regarding Ukrainian culture. I fulfilled my language learning requirements with Russian and felt with the ongoing geopolitical circumstances it was important for me to learn more about Ukrainian culture. Hearing stories from both sides of the divide I came to better understand that no nation is a

monolith, and despite the conflict there were a variety of views among both Russians and Ukrainians. I heard the stories of horror and regret of Russians who watched their homeland commit atrocities from abroad and the stories of brave Ukrainians who had escaped their war-torn country and still had family on the front lines. The oral narratives coming from both sides were both ones of heartbreak and anxiety and were much more impactful than any story I read on the news or picture I saw online. This also opened up questions of nuance as I encountered Russian speaking Ukrainians in my courses who were being stigmatized for their language despite being a victim of the war and colonialism themselves. By hearing individuals tell their own personal story I was able to become more empathetic to the people caught up within the tragic conflict and expand my worldview to encompass an understanding that was not black and white.

A myriad of the courses within the CIL course list were in my area of interest and I took significantly more credits than were required for this reason. I took courses in Scandinavian studies, East Asian studies, Slavic studies, cultural studies and several other fields. Taking courses from a variety of different area studies allowed me to comprehend how cultures formed and advanced. Each culture was unique, but all shared in that there was a period in which literary storytelling was not accessible to a majority of the population. Oral storytelling, record keeping, and didactic tales were essential in the preservation of the culture. Once the oral became literary the oral transmission of the culture became less significant and some cultures even believe the spirit of the story was stolen. The ongoing change and development of the story each time it was told was a key aspect of the culture and with its disappearance the lower echelons of society became invisible in the historical record. This has always been

incredibly fascinating to me, and I thought it meant oral culture died in the seventeenth century, but this changed during my time studying abroad in Iceland.

Due to Iceland's relatively later conversion to Christianity oral storytelling was an important factor of life in the medieval ages and many of their greatest literary works are records of tales that have been retold and passed through generations for centuries. In Iceland I learned from one of our course professors Dale Kedwards that the tradition of handwriting copies of manuscripts lasted into the twentieth century and only became obsolete when the radio became a household item. This inspired me to reflect on the "literary" aspect of modern culture, resulting in the realization that society is beginning to return to oral culture via technology. New innovations within my lifetime have changed the way people consume even the most basic information and a return to oral storytelling via social media has allowed individuals to share their stories in their own words. Throughout my time abroad I got to know one of my fellow students who is completing research in indigenous psychology. She greatly increased my knowledge on this topic and informed me that in many indigenous cultures in Canada the art of oral storytelling has not died, and many efforts are being preserved to keep the art alive. The conversations on this topic broadened my perspective even further and allowed me to consider perspectives other than the white westerner point of view I was brought up knowing. Overall, my time in Iceland allowed me to understand not only the unique lens of Iceland but also learn more about the people who have been living in the place I call home for thousands of years.

In conclusion, my experience in CIL enabled me to better understand the ways in which I absorb information best, as well as the cultural contexts that play into orality as

both a strictly educational means and as the artform of storytelling. Each of the CIL requirements taught me something unique and the culmination of this information will make me a more engaged student as I enter my master's program in international studies this coming fall.