

Introduction

My global experience took place in Berlin, Germany, where I spent six weeks of my Leadership-in-Action project with an environmental news platform non-governmental organization Earth.Org. As I have spent the first summer of my Laidlaw Scholars Programme in South Korea, my home country, I hoped to gain a different insight navigating a foreign country where I had no foreknowledge of its culture nor language. My primary objective was to understand its unique culture the best I can within the limited time span as my first research summer revealed the importance of culture within my research interest. Moreover, as I visit the country with advanced nuclear energy policies, I hoped to learn more about how Germany was able to achieve it beyond political decision and develop a deeper understanding of the global energy issue.

Cultural Adaptation

Living in Germany required a vast amount of adjustment for myself. I have picked out a residence that was set in one of the safer communities within Berlin as I wished to avoid discrimination and other related struggles the best I can as a visible minority. Since Berlin was one of the most diverse cities within Germany, I became less anxious of being seen as an outsider and less scared as I entered the city. However, the reality of the city was a lot more different than what I expected.

Many of Berlin's tourist attractions were filled with foreigners who were visiting the city as an outsider. This allowed a greater visibility of Berlin's racial diversity. However, it seemed such visibility was limited to these tourist attractions. When I visited local markets or walked along the square around my temporary residence, my status as an East Asian became more visible. While I was always aware of the fact that I am a visible minority, the sight provided me a different sentiment compared to Toronto. In Toronto, it was much easier to feel as though I am part of the local communities since there are many people with East Asian ethnicity within the city along with other racial population. Although I was always faced with the reality that I am a foreigner and an outsider in various ways, such was a less visible difference. In Berlin, however, I was unable to feel as though I am 'not' a visible outsider when the racial difference is so glaringly obvious.

As I started my project in Berlin, I was most afraid of the struggles I would endure due to the language barrier. While I had studied basic conversational phrases in German and had heard about the frequent usage of English within the city due to tourism, I was concerned that I'd face difficulties in navigating through the city without knowing how to properly speak German. While there were difficulties in navigating public libraries as many of the employees within the institutions spoke German rather than being familiar with English, I was able to easily conduct day-to-day excursions in markets and other facilities that I visited. While it was impossible to

communicate in English every time, most exchanges were accomplished because many residents of Berlin understood English even if they were not familiar with speaking the language. Moreover, my ability to comprehend few German written words aided the interactions.

While my struggles due to language barriers were minimal, and there were almost no discriminatory difficulties I faced within the society, I experienced the unspoken pressure walking around as an ‘outsider’. No one explicitly rebuked nor showed rude attitudes. In fact, Berlin was a pleasant city for me to conduct my first ‘international’ research experience, especially as it was a first time for me to visit a foreign country alone without any family members. Yet, there was an inexplicable sense of overwhelming pressure. I am yet to understand the root cause of this pressure that cannot be excused as distress over work. It was more akin to the sense of being in a place where I do not belong, despite the welcoming and kind gestures of the people I have met throughout the weeks. It was an interesting experience in a relatively safe environment where I relearned the forgotten sense of ‘not belonging’ in a community.

Professional and Social Interactions

The professional environment in Berlin was not much different from the experience in Toronto. Most of the professional interactions were conducted in the city library, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, where I was able to find most of my resources in the newspaper reading room. As there were minimal interactions required in such a setting, I found familiarity whenever I visited the library amongst unfamiliarity.

Yet, there was a significant difference in visiting the library. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin is a public city library that is funded by the government and is open to all visitors. Yet, it required the visitors to keep their belongings in the locker and bring personal items inside a basket they provided. It was an interesting security measure that did not exist in smaller public libraries like the Zentral-und Landesbibliothek Berlin – Berliner Stadtbibliothek.

Most of my professional interactions with my Earth.Org editor was conducted online due to the organization being based on Hong Kong. Due to the time differences, we mostly shared our correspondences through email after few online meetings before the immediate start of the project to establish the grounds for the project. Such experience made me dwell on my decision to work on nuclear energy policies in Germany instead of Hong Kong. Choosing Hong Kong would have certainly made my adaptation easier in the East Asian setting despite the vast differences that exists between Hong Kong and South Korea. Yet, it would have been much more difficult for me to have access to information regarding nuclear energy policies within the country due to differences in the governments’ stances on the nuclear energy industry. The reflection on such aspect as I continued my correspondence with my editor allowed me to feel more secure in my choice of heading to Berlin for the international experience as a part of the Laidlaw Scholars Programme.

It was much harder for me to experience social relationships in Berlin due to the circumstances of my work environment. However, I was able to meet an American-Canadian scholar who was researching in a Berlin institution as a part of her post-doctorate degree program. The meeting with her was a coincidence as I did not formally approach her but had shared contacts in the laundry room of my temporary residence where we started talking over a certain issue we faced with the machines. Unlike the informal and casual circumstances, we were able to socialize again twice through visiting museums, libraries, and a bookstore. It was an invaluable experience for me to discuss many global issues that the both of us were interested in. As an individual who prefers to avoid unexpected outcomes and social interactions, it was an interesting experience for me to learn what 'serendipity' means, even in the most unfamiliar setting. This interaction had become one of the highlights in my experience abroad.

Personal Growth

My experience in Berlin, Germany taught me adaptability in a manner that looked different from my experience living in Toronto as an international student. In Berlin, my experience was not composed of explicit participations in unique customs or learning about a specific German culture through a local resident. Instead, I lived through the differences in the day-to-day lives. For example, I went out one day on a Monday to buy some groceries as I relied on cooking meals than eating out in restaurants throughout my project. Unexpectedly, I found that most of the markets were closed due to an Easter-related holiday. It was a shocking revelation to me as I had never been taught that Germany is a religious nation where all public services close for a religious holiday. I had believed that Germany is one of the nations without a national religion due to historic circumstances. Yet, this realization upon learning that every single grocery markets were closed except for a convenience store located near tourist hotels was an interesting experience for me to learn and understand a different culture. That day, I quickly sought out an alternative since I had to buy the groceries, allowing me to become flexible and adapt as swiftly as possible in a foreign culture.

Personal growth, however, came from a more internal reflection as I continued my project in Germany. Throughout the weeks, various factors such as unfamiliarity, overwhelming pressures, and isolation have hindered my functionality. While I had always had difficulty in motivation due to personal issues, the experience in Germany especially worsened my conditions. Such prompted me to struggle throughout the first three weeks to familiarize myself with the new environment while grappling through the project.

Despite the vague sense of issues I held over the years, the experience abroad where I was required to accomplish a task allowed me to face them more directly. Unlike the educational environment where there were many forces that both supported and motivated me despite the difficulties, I was physically alone in Berlin. The anxiety over the situation worsened over time until a sense of familiarity settled in.

Many circumstances around the experience necessitated internal struggles for me to grapple with. It caused more difficulties than I had ever experienced. Yet, the private moments that required me to introspectively reflect upon the situation allowed me to grow personally in a way I had never anticipated.

I understood myself better than before, prompting me to find solutions to the internal struggles the best I can, while becoming more accepting when nothing could be done but to simply endure the difficulties. It was one of the most difficult moments throughout my project abroad as it intertwined with the external issues. However, the level of difficulty had also allowed me a chance to rebuild my own definition of myself and to understand myself better – to turn to a healthier solution for myself. While such was not an experience I had anticipated during the planning stages, it was the moment of most significant growth for me.

Leadership

My understanding of leadership changed drastically due to my personal struggles throughout the experience abroad. While I had initially focused on the qualities of ‘working together’ as a concept that centered around leadership, integrity became a new focus for me through this LiA project. As I worked through my struggles to accomplish the project, I reflected upon how a ‘good’ leader would act under these circumstances. Or should a ‘good’ leader be someone who has the least number of personal issues in the first place? Yet, such never seemed to be the case.

My reflection over the idea of leadership never concluded even to this day. It would be impossible for any group of teams to choose a leader while being aware of every internal turmoil they may face. Yet, I learned that ‘asking for help’ as a leader was the most undermined quality. While many teams would be avoidant of a leader who would require other people’s aid in every single quest, a leader who would not be afraid to admit their faults, misgivings, and troubles would be the most efficient and helpful leader to the team. As I met many people in the day-to-day lives in Berlin such as librarians, security workers, cashiers, and even receptionists, I newly faced the importance of honesty and integrity. While such seemed to be an individualistic quality that has little connection to leadership, I now understand its crucial role within leaders. I had once perceived a leader who would present themselves as unwaveringly strong as an ideal, but I now understand that such strength comes from their transparency and humility to admit their own weaknesses.

Conclusion

My global experience in Germany was a transformative journey that significantly impacted my personal growth beyond professional capacity. Through adaptation in a new

culture, I developed cultural competencies, flexibility in the face of unexpected circumstances, and resourcefulness. The insights into leadership were further gained through the internal turmoil I faced due to various circumstances in a foreign environment. Although the experience was a mix of growth and tribulations, I am confident that such would only allow the lessons learned through this project to continue influencing my approach to international and professional opportunities in the future.