

Global Competency - Reflective Essay

Seiji Brown

In the fall semester of 2022, I embarked on a life-changing journey by studying in Kyoto, Japan, for a full year. Throughout this transformative experience, I encountered new friends, tried unfamiliar cuisines, and shared moments of both joy and misery. Despite the numerous challenges I faced in adjusting to a new culture, including language barriers, new social norms, and occasional feelings of isolation, I wouldn't trade this experience for anything in the world.

Studying in Japan presented its own set of difficulties, particularly due to the limited English proficiency prevalent in the country. With the reserved and introverted nature of Japanese people compared to the typical North American, it initially seemed quite intimidating to connect with others. I quickly realised the privilege I had enjoyed in English-speaking environments, where others accommodated my language needs. It was time for me to reciprocate and step out of my comfort zone to engage with Japanese people, even if it meant making mistakes and feeling embarrassed. This willingness to embrace discomfort allowed me to gradually gain confidence in speaking Japanese and create genuine connections with locals. As I ventured beyond my linguistic comfort zone, I discovered a world of new opportunities, from joining friends at restaurants to participating in cultural festivals. Embracing the unknown became my new “normal” and motivated me to continually say "yes" to novel experiences and expand my horizons.

Another significant aspect of Japanese culture that left a profound impact on me was the significance of the Japanese collectivist mindset, contrasting with the individualistic society I was accustomed to in North America. Within my social circles in Japan, prioritising group harmony often took more importance over individual expression. This emphasis on mutual respect and understanding the social hierarchies made for a remarkably polite and harmonious society. I found myself reflecting on my own behaviour, striving to follow suit with traits of etiquette, modesty, and humility valued by my Japanese friends. By embracing these cultural norms, I not only deepened my connections with others but also was able to appreciate different ways of socially acceptable behaviour contrary to what I was accustomed to. The emphasis on respect didn't end with human interaction as it can be seen diffusing into the heightened appreciation for nature. The Japanese reverence for the natural world resonated with me, prompting me to seek tranquillity in the simplicity of nature and foster a deeper connection with the environment. I have become much more mindful about pollution, sustainable living choices and striving for a more pure and cleaner world.

Perhaps one of the most profound lessons I took away from my time in Japan was the realisation that happiness does not hinge on material possessions. Despite living in a modest dorm room with minimal belongings, I found myself happier than ever before. My Japanese friends similarly embraced minimalist lifestyles, prioritising experiences over material wealth. Rather than flaunting possessions or the size of their living spaces, we opted to gather

in communal spaces, enjoying the company of friends and the richness of our shared experiences.

My year abroad in Japan was a journey of personal growth, cultural immersion, and self-discovery. Through overcoming language barriers, adapting to social norms, and embracing minimalist living, I gained valuable insights into Japanese culture and a deeper understanding of myself. This experience has left an undeniable mark on my worldview, giving me a greater appreciation for diversity, resilience in the face of challenges, and a sense of contentment derived from nature and simplicity. As I reflect on my time in Japan, I am filled with gratitude for the lessons learned and the lasting friendships forged, highlighting the transformative power of cross-cultural experiences.

In the future, my goal is to pursue a masters degree in international relations in Japan following my bachelors degree. By gaining skills through my experience abroad, I can better relate to the perspectives of people all over the world regardless of their culture, religion, ethnicity and values. Looking at issues from a culturally relativist point of view will help me bridge the gaps to problems in order to make a difference for all parties involved. I am also passionate about making a better and more inclusive world for all human beings and I feel like the time away from Canada has helped me be more empathetic towards people who don't fit neatly into the boxes that we create for what is to be expected within our culture. These perspectives have been eye opening and will be beneficial in multiple different facets of my life going forward.