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Reflections from my Experiences in Learning Through Intercultural Exchanges



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As the daughter of a woman who migrated to a new country not once, but twice, I have always been fascinated by the exchange among people from different cultures. I spent the first ten years of my life in Costa Rica, raised by a Salvadoran family and then moved to the United States, where I was raised in what could be considered a traditional North American household. Even though I was a child, I could clearly see the cultural differences in these different environments, and I had to decide if I wanted to immerse myself in the new culture or find a way to harmonize these differences. This was not easy, especially as a teenager who had to worry about fitting in and not standing out in a way that would make me feel like the “other.” Also, thanks to my grandparents’ generous support, I was able to travel back to Costa Rica every year, which meant that I had to “code-switch” depending on the context and who my peers were. I am truly grateful for these experiences, because they contributed to my process of shaping my identity and still today, they help me whenever I have to challenge feelings of vulnerability, especially as a student or a young professional working in a multicultural environment.



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As an undergraduate student in the United States, I took advantage of every opportunity for cultural exchange that I came across, including joining a conversation partner programme in college and studying abroad in Lyon, France for a semester. These experiences were some of the highlights of my college years, so as a graduate student, I also took the opportunity to take a course across Indonesia (Bali, Sulawesi, Sumatra and Jakarta), which marked another turning point in my life. During this course abroad, I began to see how similar this country, which was the furthest I had ever been from home, was to Costa Rica, yet also different. One of the main differences I noticed was how in Bali, I felt a stronger connection between people’s spirituality and the food they produced. For example, I saw offerings in the beautiful rice terraces of the Subak and even on the busy sidewalks in downtown Ubud. In contrast, I did not feel that strong connection here in Costa Rica or in the United States. I believe we used to have similar rituals in agriculture for example, but those are slowly disappearing, and that trip inspired me to nurture that connection personally and to look for it in my surroundings as well.

Therefore, when I graduated from my master’s programme in the US a few months after that course, I decided to move back to Costa Rica, after fifteen years, to see what life would be like for me here. As you might have guessed, one of the first jobs I found was in a multicultural exchange. I worked at a private institute for almost eight months where I mostly taught English and chaperoned North



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American teenagers during most of their first experiences abroad, where they were learning about a new culture and practicing a new language. Shortly after that, I began working at Earth Charter (EC) International and the EC Center for Education for Sustainable Development at the University for Peace (UPeace). When I started working here five years ago, I had no idea I was going to learn so much about myself by interacting and collaborating with so many different types of people.

When you first step onto the UPeace campus, which is probably the smallest university campus I have ever visited when it comes to infrastructure (not nature), you immediately see the rich diversity of people as you walk down the hallways. I started my UPeace experience as a staff member, not as a student, but I still made sure to take advantage of any opportunity for intercultural exchange that was planned on campus. Each morning when I saw the students on their way to their classrooms, I was filled with

curiosity and a yearning to join their class discussions, but I waited a few years before becoming a student. In any case, being a UPeacer is not just about being part of the classroom discussions or excursions, it is also about the daily interactions that come with being part of the same small, but diverse, community. For example, a Zumba class, a dinner party, and a casual conversation when you run into a friend in the town's farmer's market can all be spaces where we can learn from each other's distinct lived experiences and worldviews.

It is important to take a moment to reflect on how these experiences of studying and working in diverse contexts, while being surrounded by like-minded people who are also not afraid to leave their comfort zone, are rare. I constantly remind myself of how fortunate I am to have been able to have these experiences. In addition to this, we also have to consider the negative carbon footprint that this type of travel leaves on the environment. So almost ten years ago I began to wonder, how can we



all have these types of experiences, connecting us to nature, to ourselves, and to each other, so that we can all contribute to the well-being of all and the planet?

I was not expecting to find an answer to my question so fast, but I did when I started working at the EC Education Center. I joined the team in 2018, and I was amazed to see how so many people around the world were contributing their time and effort to a global movement that was based on ethics and connectedness. The network meetings and courses were not about receiving a letter grade or getting a raise at work, they were about sharing and understanding our experiences as members of one Community of Life and finding solutions to the planetary crises that are becoming harder and harder to ignore each day. By the time I joined the ECI team, the world had already started working towards the Sustainable Development Goals, so it was also nice to be part of a movement that was working towards the SDGs under a unified moral compass, articulated in the Earth Charter document.



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Shortly after joining the team, I was entrusted with an exciting and important project for the EC Movement: coordinating the youth network. The ECI Youth Programme is made up of Young Leaders ages 18 to 30, who have taken the Leadership, Sustainability and Ethics (LSE) online course. This meant that I was going to facilitate the LSE course and continue to organize online spaces regularly for the course alumni, the Earth Charter Young Leaders (ECYLs), who wanted to remain engaged and connected to each other.

One of my favorite parts about the LSE course is that it is truly a collaborative effort. First, I would not have known where to start without the support and guidance of my ECI colleagues. I received a crash course in education from them, since I did not have formal training in this and have since continued to learn about the EC pedagogy daily. In addition, this course always counts on the support ECYLs who volunteer their time and energy to co-facilitate the courses by engaging with participants through the various discussion forums and live meetings. Co-facilitators also come from a diversity of backgrounds, including different nationalities, academic backgrounds, professions, artistic skills and hobbies. ECYLs are a big driver behind the expansion of our youth network.

So how does the LSE course help me contribute to creating transformative experiences like the ones I had as a young college student abroad or as a UPeacer? While it may not be an immersive lived



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experience in another country, the LSE course is a relatively durable experience, lasting ten weeks, which allows plenty of time for participants to learn not only through the course materials, but also to reflect on how they relate to their own context and how they are connected to fellow participants' experiences across the world. Creating with this an experience that can strengthen our relating skills of appreciation connectedness, humility, empathy and compassion (Jordan, 2021).

Today, young people have access to multiple social media platforms with an unlimited supply of multicultural content on demand. For example, I am blown away by the trivia facts that my teenage cousin knows about other cultures, such as being able to identify country flags or perform a short dance that she saw on TikTok. However, if we are constantly scrolling and moving on from one influencer's video to the next in a matter of seconds, when will we take the time to reflect on this exchange? When does it become an intercultural, participatory exchange and not simply a multicultural consumption of content? Through the LSE course, by opening weekly discussion forums, in

addition to weekly opportunities to connect through Zoom and interact with someone in a different country and even a different time zone, we are creating the environment where these moments for reflection and connection can flourish.

The LSE course is a great lifelong learning experience for students who do not have access to a diverse classroom, in addition to contributing to filling the gap caused by the lack of access to education for sustainable development. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report, Education for people & planet: Creating sustainable futures for all, an analysis of 78 national curricula showed that only 55% mentioned "ecology" and 47% mentioned "environmental education" (UNESCO, 2016). The LSE course contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 4 [Quality Education] Target 4.7 by allowing participants to not only strengthen their knowledge and skills of global citizenship, but also the ones needed to promote sustainability, which are, of course, interconnected.

I believe that one of the most important skills that young people can strengthen in this course to contribute to all the Global



Goals is that of empathy, which various educators, facilitators, and researchers have sought to nurture through dialogue and perspective-taking, which can be done not only across cultures but also with our ancestors, other forms of life, and future generations. For example, Tammy Bormann and David Campt, developed the Arc of Dialogue structure, including the four phases of community building, sharing diversity of experiences, exploring perspectives beyond our own experiences, and synthesizing and bringing closure (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, n.d.), which can be applied in a virtual setting, and which can be observed in the LSE course, contributing to enhancing this virtual intercultural exchange among young leaders who want to learn more about sustainability and take action.

Because of the feelings of familiarity that many participants are able to nurture, friendships and partnerships can naturally emerge from this course and the ECYL network. This is another one of my favorite parts of my work with the youth programme. The young leaders who decide to stay engaged do so because they want to see a real positive change happen in their communities, so many use their creativity, knowledge of ecoliteracy, and systems thinking skills to start their own projects during or after the course. They also stay involved because of the connection this network brings to other sustainability leaders making up a global movement. One of these examples comes

from Greshma Pious Raju, an Earth Charter Young Leader and UPeace alumna from Kerala, India, who started the EcoPeace Teen Café Project, to create a virtual space for teenagers to come together to learn about timely issues, discuss systemic solutions, ask questions, and share their opinions. Greshma is the epitome of collaboration; despite starting with very little funding, she was able to make a difference thanks to her mobilizing skills, which she used to bring young people together, including fellow ECYLs and former UPeace classmates, to share their knowledge, skills and passion with a younger generation. I am also inspired by this example because even though Greshma does not speak Spanish, she was able to connect with ECYLs from Latin America, such as Rocío Collantes from Panama, and inspire them to use the EcoPeace Teen Café model to multiply her efforts and reach Latin American teens as well!



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Greshma is not alone in taking on this type of project because many ECYLs, living in different countries and regions, also work together constantly to plan webinars, implement local workshops, and even participate in the organization of regional and international events and conferences contributing to justice, sustainability, and peace. For example, Laura Restrepo, an ECYL from Colombia, greatly contributed to the Local and Regional Conferences of Youth in Colombia, under the framework of the Climate Change Conference of the Parties, and she motivated the Colombian youth to commit to the Earth Charter during their local conference, in addition to inspiring the Latin American youth to include important sustainability principles articulated in the Earth Charter in the regional youth declaration. The ECYLs who are educators, such as Victor Mathew Ayegba from Nigeria for example, are also a great source of education because they are able to take the educational resources available from the EC network and contribute to transforming education in their classrooms and beyond.

Another source of inspiration comes from the European ECYLs. Over the years, several students from the Windesheim College of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, specifically from the Global Project and Change Management programme, have participated in the LSE course, thanks to support from their professors and administrators, and three students have now completed their internship requirement at ECI, which emphasizes the importance of collaboration in an international environment. Two of these students have completed their internship by contributing to the youth programme: first Valerie Knöpker evaluated the transformative learning potential of the LSE as a research project, and then Ann Cathrin Natchwey brought together the European ECYLs to successfully plan and host the inaugural We Grow Together Summer Camp together, which involved a group of 45 young participants (ages 16-30) from 22 different homelands during a week in the Netherlands.



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The examples above of Young Leaders turning conscience into action are only a few among many, who inspire me every day and help me shape my definitions of global citizenship and Earth leadership. Through the amalgamation of these experiences and sources of inspiration, I have learned to pay more attention to my surroundings, not just to examine the complexities and problems, but also to admire the beauty around me and strengthen my sense of responsibility. As I try to regularly practice gratitude, I like to take into consideration the contribution that these experiences of multicultural exchange have on my life, especially in how they have helped me expand my worldview. Can you imagine if all young people around the world could have similar opportunities to learn through multicultural experiences and exchanges? So let us work together to be these examples of collaboration wherever we make decisions and inspire those around us to join these efforts. We can all appreciate the Community of Life around us and share our respect and care for it with the rest of the world, all while knowing we are not doing this alone.

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