

Emmi Harner

Introduction

Hello, my name is Emmi, and I began my international journey when I attended an international youth camp in Lebanon at the age of 16. It was my first time being confronted with my privileges as a German citizen, and the first time experiencing the joy of coming together from all over the world to be in the same moment, living, laughing, and learning from one another. In these kinds of moments, you feel like you can move mountains together. Because it is a wonder, a huge coincidence that we can get together, overcoming cultural differences, borders, and misunderstandings. If we can achieve that, then we have the power to change the world. This very fulfilling feeling was one of the starting points of how I fell in love with a life surrounding with people from all over the world.

During my short but very impactful time in Lebanon, I began my journey of learning. Not to say that I did not learn anything until then, but it was mostly put upon me, instead of me seeking learning opportunities and reflecting actively on my experiences. My 16-year-old self-began the active learning path, where I sought discomfort.

In this portfolio, I want to reflect upon 2 of my international experiences, within the last 3 years. The first one is my volunteer service in an international organic and community-based agricultural school in Japan. The second experience is my job as a student assistant for the welcome service from the University of Gothenburg, where I worked in a very international team, organizing events to welcome international

students to their student life here in Gothenburg. This Portfolio reflects upon my personal growth and skills I have gained.

Asian Rural Institute, Japan

After high school, the urge to go abroad was unstoppable. Lebanon was a taste of something I knew I wanted to include in my life: international experiences. I saw in them the promise of personal growth, adventure stories, and deep connections. So, with no hesitation, I started the application process to do an ecumenical volunteer experience at the Asian Rural Institute in Japan, short ARI. ARI is a community-based agricultural school where you live together in a highly international community with people from all over the 6 continents. I left Germany with no expectations about the specifics of my time there and a bag full of resolutions and excitement.

The day at ARI started at 6.30 am and ended after dinner at 6.30 pm so it was a long, work-intense day. Starting the day in the early morning was difficult, I felt very tired, but because everyone had to do it together, it is was easy to keep to the strict schedule. And I very much liked the strict schedule because it gave me a structured day where I could be very productive. I wanted to keep up having a strict schedule during university because it helps me to stay on top of things. Unfortunately, I did not manage that and am still struggling to build a daily life, where I feel I am living a productive and healthy life with a good balance. In the future I need to improve, so I will be able to build up skills and reach my goals. I also understand that student life is very flexible and unstable, so finding the balance is a hard task.

In Japan, I developed the skill to talk in front of a big crowd, through a 30-minute session that every community member must hold and by coordinating people, as well

as being the moderator for events and shows. At the beginning I was very shy and stumbled over my words, but I put myself in more situations where I started to build up that skill. Because even though I am not as good as I would like to be, it is still a lot of fun for me to do it. I am good at talking, I have a carrying voice and can keep people engaged and hooked. However, the shows and presentations illuminated that I am not good at preparing presentations, have poor time management, which leads me to having no time to practice. In the future I definitely need to find better methods to improve my time management and put myself in more situation where I can practice my moderating skills. This is something I would like to make use of in my future career,

Furthermore, I gained the skill have a conversation with every person, because I interacted with so many different groups, for example, student groups, guests at ARI from around the world and people from different cultures. I enjoy engaging people in conversations a lot and love the opportunity it holds to learn something new. This skill was enriched by another learning that I will extend in the next paragraph.

A friend I made in Japan taught me an important lesson: Listening. At the beginning, my idea of having a conversation was a lot of sharing from my side, and I was also very loud and talkative. This brings up a lot of fun conversations; however, it does not leave room for quieter people to include themselves in the conversation. Furthermore, if I had continued that way, I would have overheard and not gotten to know a person and what moves them. From the start, I was impressed with her very calm manner; she did not speak a lot, but we connected instantly. She always listened to me and everyone with 100 percent of her attention and gave very thoughtful input. And I wanted to be like her! So, I practised my active listening skill and am very happy that I am now listening to people instead of only speaking to them. This opened many doors, and I get the feedback that I am very approachable and understanding, kind, and I make people feel very welcomed and comfortable. I realized that it is very important to me

to create an open atmosphere where everyone has the chance to contribute. Of course, this skill is not perfect, but it makes me happy to receive such kind feedback.

A skill that improved during my time in Japan was my ability to communicate my needs and wishes for living together in a community. ARI has a long history of community life and I was able to learn a lot from that. Despite the practice, I still can improve that because it is difficult to balance my German directness and my adapted Japanese indirectness. This mix of things gets displayed in my daily life, for example, living with my very direct German roommate who does not appreciate beating around the bush, but still, I am too direct for my Japanese friends. I want to improve my gained sensitivity for that.

My cultural awareness has grown. One reason for that is that ARI pays a lot of attention to being respectful to each culture. That translates to the rule of a conservative and modest clothing style and two separate gendered dorms. It is forbidden to enter the dorm of the opposite gender. This can feel at times very restrictive and old-fashioned, however I understand it as an act of making everyone feel comfortable.

During my time at ARI, we organized a large festival that welcomed visitors from outside. We worked in different sections and in multicultural teams. At times, this experience was quite stressful for me because I had never worked at a professional level in an international team before. I had my own expectations of what group work should look like, but some of my teammates had very different ideas about working culture. Fortunately, during that period I read *The Culture Map* by Erin Meyer, which taught me the basics of various working cultures and styles from around the world. This knowledge helped me immensely. It allowed me to approach the group with more understanding and patience, as I learned to respect other cultures' working styles and to express my own, enabling us to find common ground. The event made me realize

how little I understood about different work cultures. I gained a deeper awareness, but I also knew it was only the beginning. It helped me see that my idea of “general knowledge” was wrong, because there is no universal “general knowledge.” Everyone’s life experiences shape their understanding in unique ways.

Student Assistant for the Welcome Service, Sweden

These combined skills were the perfect preparation for my second international activity, which I would like to reflect on: working as a student assistant for the Welcome Service at the University of Gothenburg.

Being part of the welcome service was an amazing opportunity for me. Our team consisted of people from Colombia, Chile, Canada, the USA, Italy, Germany, Sweden, and Ghana. Immediately after reading the job description, I knew it was the perfect job for me. My skills of public speaking, welcoming people from different countries, planning and executing events, and working in a multicultural team were all required, and my above-mentioned skills were tested in a different scenario. It worked great and gave me more opportunities as well to step outside my comfort zone. However, I also realized how much I still want to learn and how much I want to improve my skills. In the following I will give an example of a situation where the gaps of my skills were highlighted.

I was standing on the stage explaining and playing a game with around 40 international students, however my initial idea did not perform in real life like I thought it would and a very uncomfortable silence fell over the room and it seemed like the students were not enjoying the game – from my perspective. Even though it was my game to lead, I just gave the microphone to my coworker, who is a great host, and being on

stage is in his nature. He did not know the questions I prepared for the game but took the mic regardless and pushed through with all the questions, even though the students did not seem to have as of a good time as I hoped. He did not showcase any discomfort. In that moment, I realized that I am still lacking a lot of professionalism and experience. I need to be put into situation that do not work to learn from them, get feedback, and improve for the next time. I was so uncomfortable and ashamed that it did not work that I was not able to fulfil my task, which is very unprofessional. So, in the future, I want to learn how to handle discomfort and just push through. Of course, flexibility is important too, and to be able to change a plan immediately and adapt it, but in this case, it was the learning of the importance of being confident and professional, and I was thankful and impressed with my coworker for this learning opportunity.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my first experience at the Asian Rural Institute has helped me prepare for my return. Soon I will go back to ARI and its international community for a six-month internship. I will bring with me the lessons I have learned also during my time as a student assistant and focus on how I want to continue growing during my second stay and how I want to grow my skillset.

This experience has also taught me to be more welcoming and open to others. Intercultural exchange is very important: we share cultural practices, laugh together, and learn about one another. Through these moments, you not only discover new ways of living and thinking, but you also learn more about yourself. These experiences

open the door to new perspectives, help you think more deeply, and build understanding between people.

For me, these intercultural experiences have helped me become who I am today. I have grown a lot and felt a lot of love and appreciation. I am very excited for my next chapter, and I will go forward with an open heart and an open mind.

Appendix

As a little extra, I wrote 3 poems with the theme being the negative sides of an international life.

too good at goodbyes

Exciting, nervous, unknown friends,
time, nature, a deck of cards
not much time is needed
for joy, for connection, for a hug
waving a goodbye with a tear and a smile
no one knows the next time
see you again

hello

people

people

hello

hello

goodbye

goodbye

friend

when

I don't know

Again

Again

speed

Longing for community

Longing for stability

Longing for peace

Longing for a daily life

For joy and kindness