

Journal Editorial: “International Research as International Curiosity”

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The world of my rural northern Michigan upbringing was small. We were at least a 4 hour drive from the nearest major airport, my school was happy to graduate more than 50 kids each year, and internet connectivity was sparse. The wider world outside of what I knew seemed daunting, almost impossible to comprehend. The closest I came to experiencing anything that could be considered “international” was the many bridges to Canada nearby, which never seemed to truly capture the sense of the word. However, by the time I had finished my undergraduate work, I was moving to Tokyo to live and teach with no idea of when I would return. I cannot say I never looked back, because I did; it was terrifying, and I vividly remember my family driving away and realizing the next day I would be living on the other side of the world. But it never felt impossible, like it had when I was a kid. “International” had become smaller, more understandable, more exciting.

This begs the question -- what changed? Certainly, the world itself changed; globalization has continued to exponentially expand our individual access to the world. Emerging technology and the digital sphere have allowed a seemingly infinite amount of information and people to be available at our fingertips. Borders, both political and geographical, have become more porous. People migrate to and from all corners of the world, creating an ever more diverse melting pot of a global society. But *I* also changed. I grew curious. Instead of seeing “international” or “global” as unknowable concepts, I realized I wanted to learn, to understand, but I didn’t know how. So, I did what any kid would do and I asked questions. I pestered my dad for stories of his childhood in Singapore. I checked out every book from my local library on learning languages I could get my hands on. And by the time I finished middle school, I had memorized the capitals of every country in the world. From these simple questions, other, more complex ones began to form: what was life like for other American families in Singapore when my dad was there? What about families from other parts of the world? Why were so many people moving to Singapore? How many languages are there in the world, and what led to English being seen as a global kind of default? Why do some countries have more than one capital? And just like that, I realized that by simply allowing myself to be curious and following through on those curiosities, I was doing international research.

The term “international research” can seem intimidating, especially as an undergraduate student. Learning how to do any kind of research is hard enough, but now you add in fluency in another language and travel to and from other countries with unfamiliar cultures/foods/social norms/etc.? And, to be fair, I have done those things (even if my Japanese fluency leaves quite a bit to be desired). I’ve lived abroad, done formal archival research in Japanese, applied methodologies I learned as an undergraduate to international contexts and other layers of complexities onto projects because they were internationally focused. But it doesn’t need to be as difficult and time-consuming as that; you don’t need to be fluent in other languages, be able to afford or willing to live abroad. Those are all wonderful things to do, of course, and you may shock yourself when you realize you’ve somehow found yourself living in Tokyo, like I did.

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But I was also doing “international research” back when I was just asking my dad questions. In a way, I was conducting an informal oral history project that happened to take the shape of my dad reminiscing about going to school basketball tournaments in Malaysia. International research can start small, it can be anything, formal or informal, interdisciplinary or as hyper-focused as you want. The important thing is that you’re curious and engaging with the world.

While globalization has increased over the last few decades, there has been significant recent pushback that can feel disheartening. Countries around the world are leaning further into isolationist ideology, tightening borders and building walls (physical and metaphorical) that sever connections and arbitrarily separate us. Some have begun questioning the use of global engagement and prefer we reorient inward once more. Whatever the causes and agendas behind this unfortunate momentum, I believe this only further emphasizes the importance of international curiosity and research today. To be a globally conscious researcher is to desire to understand the world and people around you, to build connection and empathy, to understand the lessons we’ve learned from history and carry them forward.

And the most beautiful part of all this is that the world is on our doorstep. As a student, you don’t need to travel to the other side of the world to conduct international research. You just need to engage your curiosity. You can connect your current studies to existing research, use studies or articles written by international scholars, or think about how your findings might apply across different geographies and cultures. As an English major, I chose to have a soft focus in world literature, bringing in works written outside of the traditional English canon to engage with more diverse perspectives. You can take a foreign language course for fun and begin learning about other cultures. I decided to take a Japanese class on a whim my freshman year which led to so many amazing experiences speaking with Japanese people and immersing myself as best I could long before any travel. You can do something as simple as get a coffee with a fellow student from another country and make a new friend. I volunteered as a conversation partner with international students and also tutored some of them in English. I learned so much from them in return about their home countries, cultures, languages, etc. International research is ultimately defined by an international curiosity and an interest in becoming an informed global citizen. How you choose to interpret that, big or small, formal or informal, is up to you.