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### Learning through Cross-Cultural 'Textiquette'

Since the beginning of this semester, I have been chatting with university students from Kazakhstan. We have shared children's fairy tales from each of our countries, discussed what our schools were like growing up, shared funny videos from the internet, learned each other's languages (well, I learned a few Kazakh and Russian words, they already speak English very well), and had random conversations about each other's cultures. We have learned so much about one another, yet, I have never visited Kazakhstan, and they have never visited the U.S. These interactions were completely virtual through the amazing opportunity provided by a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) experience sponsored by the American Councils for International Education for the Central Asia University Partnerships Program (UniCEN). COIL provides significant international experiences to students and faculty by facilitating intercultural exchange and aims to promote global awareness among other 21st century skills. As a part of this experience, I and a few other UNC Charlotte students have been able to meet virtually with a group of students from Baitursynov University in Kazakhstan. Our interactions have been solely through Zoom meetings and text messaging. As a part of the experience, we are also working on research projects about the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

As someone who has never traveled outside of the country, being able to closely communicate with people from the other side of the world is a completely new experience for me. I have always enjoyed learning about other cultures, so having the opportunity to learn about holidays celebrated in Kazakhstan, the languages spoken there, a summary of their history, and

even the weather, has made this opportunity even more exciting. With the state of the world these past two years, it has been refreshing to talk to people outside of my physical vicinity who have such different viewpoints and experiences, and are equally as eager to learn about my culture as I am about theirs.

What has really stood out to me these past few months is the challenge of communicating digitally. I do not mean this in a sense of a language barrier, the students from Kazakhstan speak and understand English very well, I am referring to the difference in texting mannerisms. While we are able to understand each other easily through Zoom, tone of voice and facial expressions providing helpful insight during conversations, texting with my research partner is a bit different. With people my age, I am used to starting texts with a friendly “Hi!” following up with a conversation including minimal usage of correct punctuation, and finishing off with multiple exclamation points and an onslaught of relevant emoticons. After exchanging a few texts with my partner, I came to the conclusion that we have very different “textiquittes,” or etiquettes in texting. Although we are the same age, he exclusively texts in a professional manner, rarely using emoticons or exclamation points. I have come to notice that this is the case with all of the other students from Kazakhstan. Soon after beginning to chat, I adapted my manner of texting to avoid any kind of confusion or misunderstandings. The last thing I wanted to do was make my partner feel uncomfortable with my way of texting. I continued to use emoticons here and there, as I find them helpful in expressing feelings that sometimes words can not, but for the most part, I have caught myself thinking through the way I word my thoughts and which emoticons might be universally understood the same way.

Whether their manner of texting is due to cultural differences or simply because of our academic relationship, the university students from Kazakhstan have opened my eyes to the

importance of acknowledging differences in textiquette. As our world becomes more and more interconnected through technology, we are all likely to encounter people from different cultures or countries in a digital venue. This opens the door to the exchange of ideas, cultures, values, and so much more, but can also possibly lead to communication barriers. It is important to keep in mind that certain phrases commonly used in our culture, could be completely unheard of or understood differently in another. Likewise, certain emoticons could be interpreted a different way in each culture. Digital communication has certainly created this unique new challenge to how we understand one another. Without the insight of facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice, communicating through text puts us at a disadvantage of not having a clear understanding of someone else's thoughts and feelings. While this is especially true amongst people of different cultures, the same could be said for anyone, even those from our own culture. We each have our own way of expressing ourselves, especially through digital platforms, sometimes making communication through text a challenge no matter how similar we are. Therefore, it is imperative that we respect each person's perspectives, mannerisms, and way of expressing themselves, to enable effective and valuable communication amongst one another in our increasingly technological and interconnected world.