

Short-term International Student Teaching Internships: Creating Successful Transformational Experiences

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This article introduces a short-term, three week international student teaching internship as a transformational learning experience opportunity. The program has been in operation since 2007. The development and administration of the program, including the relationship between the home and host colleges is presented as well as a discussion on the process and steps taken to select, prepare, and supervise students in Plymouth, England schools. The authors offer their observations of the 34 participants' transformation as both emerging teachers and young adults. Lessons learned and specific areas of concern for faculty leaders are also discussed.

Recognizing that it is critical to prepare teachers that demonstrate an understanding of the impact of teaching tomorrow's citizens in an increasingly diverse American nation, the authors of this article set out to provide student teachers at the University of North Florida (UNF) with an opportunity to participate in a short-term international student teaching internship. The UNF program follows the premise put forward by Villegas and Lucas (2002) that true understanding of cultural differences and similarities must be accomplished through active engagement, the engagement only found in field-based experiences outside the college classroom.

Supported by a Transformational Learning Opportunity (TLO) grant awarded by the UNF Board of Trustees, qualified students in the College of Education and Human Services participate as student teachers for three weeks in Plymouth, England. The project began in 2007. The overarching goal of the university's TLO

program is to transform the college student in the following ways: (1) develop and/or nurture the ability for independent study; (2) increase self-motivation, curiosity, sense of self-sufficiency and self-direction in planning and carrying out the student's education; and (3) nurture academic excellence through academic independence. Students may travel outside of the local area, including internationally, to experience a location that is pertinent to their field, such as a political, economic, cultural or historic destination. These travel experiences often provide students with new insights, greater confidence, and, perhaps, new relationships.

This article is a descriptive narrative of the overall process and steps taken to select, prepare, and supervise the students in the international teaching internship. It also presents the authors' observations and reflective discussion of their perception of the subsequent transformation of the 34 participant alumni. Particular attention

will be directed to the established goals for the international internship experience, professional growth as a teacher candidate as well as personal growth as a global citizen, and to the criteria established by the university for a Transformational Learning Opportunity.

Why Student Teach Abroad? Benefits of International Internships

Transformational Learning Opportunities should have the potential to enrich, broaden, or augment student learning and personal development. Having the opportunity to live and student teach in a foreign country exemplifies the spirit and definition of a TLO. Toncar and Cudmore (2000) report on the effects of a seven week overseas marketing internship in Oxford, England, for American students from Lycoming College in Pennsylvania. They state that the value to the student can be summed up in three words: “they are changed” (p.59). This change or transformation may be very obvious in some, and less obvious in others. Toncar and Cudmore identify two major changes other than the actual work experience as having had a great impact on personal growth and on a broadened world view. Students who have studied abroad bring back “a wealth of knowledge and experience that causes them to see their world differently” (p.59).

Other faculty members who have led university study abroad trips including short term internships have reported that there has been significant benefits to the college students. Wilson (1982) outlines the positive benefits of international teaching internships into four growth areas: (1) substantive knowledge of other cultures; (2) world issues and global dynamics; (3) perceptual understanding, personal growth; and (4) interpersonal connections. Willard-Holt (2001), reports that an international student teaching internship potentially changes beginning teachers thinking about themselves, curriculum design and teaching strategies. Willard-Holt’s

work with American pre-service teachers who spent one week as interns in a bilingual school in Mexico found that after returning from the experience, the students exhibited gains in empathy, patience, flexibility, increased reflectivity, self-confidence, and an improved outlook on their own lives. The students indicated that they will be “less prone to prejudge students based on cultural backgrounds, linguistic differences, or even learning disability” (p.515).

Pence and Macgillivray (2008) from James Madison University report the outcomes from a four week international practicum in Rome, Italy, which involved 15 teacher education students. Students were able to articulate the differences in the organization, structure and curriculums of the Roman schools in which they were placed and to reflect on the parallels and dissimilarities between the American school and their international placement. They, like the students in Willard-Holt’s internship, reported that they had changed as a result of the experience and had improved in the areas of self-confidence as teachers, expressing a better appreciation for diversity and language differences.

Expectations for Students and the Selection Process

While there is some mention in the literature about the selection process of students for international internship experiences, there does not seem to be any one set common protocol to follow. Toncar and Cudmore (2000) state that they evaluated, as best one can the level of maturity of the student as significant to trip participation. Woolf (2006) concurs that the both motivation and level of maturity are important factors that either can assist or undermine the student-host employer relationship. Pence and McGillivray (2007) required an essay and one letter of recommendation from the interested students, and Willard-Holt (2001) utilized a ten-item, open response questionnaire regarding previous

travel experiences, interactions with people of other cultures, and student expectations about the educational system in the home country.

After reviewing the literature, Plymouth faculty trip leaders met to discuss the pre-application, application, and preparation process, and designed a rigorous set of application expectations for students who would be selected for this opportunity. Decisions were based on the serious nature of sending pre-service teachers into Plymouth schools to work with children and youth, an enormous responsibility in any country. Host university faculty, who were familiar with Plymouth schools and had established relationships with teachers and administrators, helped in this aspect of the trip planning. As a team of faculty trip leaders, we crafted a comprehensive process which continues to be refined after each trip. This included marketing the trip, the application process, trip preparation meetings, on-site supervision, reflection, post trip responsibilities and evaluation.

A major responsibility of the home university to the participating students, particularly in this heightened time period of increased security for American citizens traveling overseas, is to be realistic in informing them about the many implications of study abroad. It has been strongly recommended that comprehensive pre-trip preparation be a part of any planning for an international internship (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Willard-Holt, 2001). This also includes the need for home country faculty support in the host country whenever possible (Toncar & Cudmore, 2000). Supervising faculty should provide the students an opportunity to critically and analytically reflect on their concerns, perceptions and possible misperceptions during the experience.

Becoming a Member of the Plymouth Team

The selection process begins with marketing the trip. Flyers are posted throughout the

education building, and information is placed on the college website five months prior to the scheduled trip. These materials extend an open invitation to attend an information meeting about the internship. The requirements for application include an overall grade point average(GPA) of 3.0, a minimum grade of B in all pre-internship field experiences, and eligibility to intern (student teach) during the semester the trip will take place. For the UNF students this means by the time of application, they must have completed all their coursework except the 12 credits required for the internship semester. Typically, 15-25 students have attended these information sessions. Students are presented with an overview of the city of Plymouth, the host college lodging and supervision, and the financial realities of the trip, the school placements and how participation in the international internship which takes place during an academic semester, will affect their Jacksonville internship placement.

Selected participants all receive a TLO scholarship which provides partial funding support and helps to offset the cost. Previous trip participants are invited to attend this information as “Plymouth ambassadors” to share their experience with the interested students. Time is given for the attending students to ask questions about the internship and the experience of living in Plymouth. Interested students are then given an application which is due back to the trip leader at a specified deadline date. This begins the process to meet all deadlines that will ensure that the students will be able to leave as planned. Overseas travel requires many forms of documentation beginning with a passport and trip leaders (and students) must be attentive to all of these details (Lee & Lupi, in press).

Once the applications are received, the trip leaders review them to see if the student has met minimum requirements. If yes, the two faculty leaders assigned to the group, plus the two leaders from the previous trip, review and rate the essay for clarity of thought, motivation, and mechanics

of grammar and syntax. While students are asked to list three references for contact by trip leaders, two university references, and one field reference, references are not vetted until after the student interview.

A thirty minute personal interview with the faculty trip leaders is required of all minimally qualified candidates for the international internship. Although the serious nature of the experience was raised in the information session, team leaders review the responsibility that comes with being overseas and in effect serving as a representative of the United States and the University of North Florida. Toncar and Cudmore (2000), state that it is important for program faculty to discuss any significant expectations with the students early in the process. During the interview it is important to elicit responses from the student that may indicate his/her readiness and maturity to travel and live abroad. This may be accomplished by direct questioning, "How do you feel about not seeing your family for three weeks?", or more indirect means such as presenting vignettes and asking for solutions, "You are in the teacher's lounge in your Plymouth school and someone asks you to compare the way schools are run in the UK and USA- how do you respond" or, on the day to day living with their peers in the residence halls, "How would you respond to a team member who is behaving inappropriately (i.e. drinking excessively or going on late night outings?)"

Interviewees are also asked to provide the faculty team leaders with any questions they may have, and time is given for general discussion. A rating evaluation sheet is then completed on each student, and references are vetted on those students who have shown an understanding of the holistic nature of the trip including the component of living outside the United States and away from family support systems. After the references are called, the trip leaders meet to determine who will be a good fit for the team and for the study abroad experience. Since this is a school-based internship

which requires close supervision, we have limited the team of students to no more than eight each semester. Woolf(2006) stresses that a successful college internship must have solid academic support stating that it is faculty involvement that integrates the external (practical) elements of the learning with the philosophical, creating a good learning experience. An 8:1 student to faculty ratio assists in the reflective process.

Trip Preparation

Students are advised during the interview that they must maintain their 3.0 GPA and provide evidence that they are successfully passing their home student teaching internship prior to leaving for the three week internship in Plymouth. All students complete ten weeks of internship at the home placement, and three weeks at the host school placement. College supervisors and cooperating teachers are informed of the intern's selection for the Plymouth trip before the start of every term, and are aware of any modifications that may be needed for the intern to meet all the requirements at the home placement. This often means that demonstration of performance based skills will need to be accelerated. Communication between the trip leaders and the supervisors are maintained periodically prior to the overseas internship trip.

Students must commit to a series of five trip preparation meetings which are held during the three month period prior to the trip date. All meetings are attended by both faculty trip leaders. The goals of the meeting are two-fold: 1) to discuss the pragmatics of traveling and living abroad and 2) to familiarize the students with each other and encourage team cohesiveness. The practical aspects of meetings cover topics typical of overseas travel such as passport acquisition, airport and luggage restrictions, time, currency, and measurement differences, weather expectations, safety and security issues, emergency numbers, housing arrangements, local transportation, and important registrations such as

with the U.S. Department of State. The creative portions of the meetings include exploring the history, topography, and local attractions found in Plymouth as well as learning about the British National curriculum and their local school placement. Students are often responsible for doing research and making presentations to be shared with the group. The host university, University College Plymouth is located a short distance from the city of Plymouth in South West England and offers an abundance of cultural, scenic, historical, and sport opportunities.

The Internship: Residing at University College Plymouth

Housing is always a concern for students. When constructing our international internship experience, we decided that we would request housing on the university campus, making it easier for the students to partner for travel to their school placements or attend social events together rather than having them spread out in host family accommodations. We have been fortunate to have our students living in small townhouses on the edge of campus within walking distance from the Plymouth airport and city bus stops. Each townhouse can accommodate six or eight students and provides a small living room, kitchen and three or four bedrooms. Students plan meals and lunches together and travel to the local big box store, ASDA (Walmart) several times during their stay for supplies in order to get a sense of what it is like to manage the day to day life tasks of living in another country. They are fully reliant on public transportation which for our students is also a transformational learning experience.

International School Placement

Prior to traveling abroad for the international internship, students are usually able to communicate through email with their Plymouth teacher and his or her students. This has served to be a very strong motivator and in some cases, reduces the apprehension of the trip

participants. Some have been able to begin pen pal relationships between their local Jacksonville internship placement students and their Plymouth class. School selection for placement of the American interns in Plymouth was a collaborative process with our liaison at the UCP. Whenever possible, our students were placed in a grade equivalent to their Jacksonville internship further increasing the opportunity to compare and contrast learning and achievement levels of students.

We began with three primary schools and have since expanded our Plymouth sites to include a secondary and special needs school, which represents various socio-economic areas of Plymouth as well as public and state schools. Head Teachers (principals) select the mentor teacher and classroom for placement of our students. Mentor teachers are provided with information on the expectations and requirements for the interns prior to their arrival. The first UNF faculty representative travels over with the students, settles them into their new home, and visits them in their school placement in the first few days in Plymouth to help them adjust to their classrooms and identify possible problems. In the final week of the internship, a second UNF faculty member travels to Plymouth to evaluate the students' teaching using the same teaching criteria that is used for students interning in the States. Typically, the American students have been taking on lessons and adjusting to the British curriculum and feel quite comfortable by the third week in the Plymouth schools.

Lessons Learned (Students)

Upon returning to the United States and the university, students are required to discuss their Plymouth experience through a reflective paper and a post trip seminar. The framework for both the paper and discussion have assigned talking points that highlight the project and TLO goals and reflect the research and findings of Toncar and Cudmore (2000) and Lee and Lupi (in press).

These findings focus on both the personal and professional growth of the student teaching intern in such areas as: the expansion of knowledge of the world outside of Jacksonville, the confidence that develops when one is independent and without the social support of familiar family members (no calling mom four times a day), and the ability to acquire new knowledge, skills and dispositions that are beneficial to a beginning teacher.

In keeping with the TLO goal of learning beyond conventional curriculum, our observations and perceptions of the students indicate that they become more open about experiencing new things and have experienced classroom lessons and skill development that is different from home student teaching placement. The students appear to be more aware of their own attributes; things they love about themselves, and things they would like to change. Students have shared with faculty leaders that through this study abroad internship, they realized they had the ability to make friends and socialize with others outside of their established peer group, and that “comfort zones” were challenged in a good way. For some students, a greater appreciation developed for the eco-friendly and less pretentious lifestyles of the English (e.g. homes and cars are smaller), as well as for their own lives and families in Florida. Most, if not all, came to respect the relationships that their Plymouth school staff seems to have with each other, the students, and the Head Teacher (principal) of their school. For example, during ‘tea time,’ which is offered twice a day at most schools, teachers and principals socialize together in the lounge discussing their home lives and the goings on around town. The relationship is relaxed and communicative. Nationally, the school system has eliminated many standardized tests which appear to have removed much of the adversarial relationship between teachers and staff. The interns generally find that they are readily accepted by school personnel and quizzed on their origins and their American accents. Since Plymouth is an area

not often frequented by American tourists, our students have the opportunity to provide more insight into life in the United States which adds to the uniqueness of the student experience. They were also able to articulate their understanding of how the Plymouth school system, which allows time for teacher collaborative planning time during the work day and week, is a wonderful way to motivate and de-stress teachers. Overall, the positive personal and professional growth of the students was reflected at the end of the trip in their comments and enthusiasm about using the experience in their future classrooms and the desire for future travel.

Lessons Learned (Faculty Trip Leaders)

Faculty trip leaders that travel to Plymouth with the students also learn and grow in significant ways. Several faculty members had not traveled abroad before this trip and made many of the same discoveries about themselves and the global community as the students. Even those who had traveled before had never had the opportunity to be involved directly with school systems and colleges in a foreign country. Faculty leaders were able to make personal connections to the educational community by getting to know the English teachers and children as individuals. Friendships and relationships were established that influenced our daily work even after we returned. The joy that permeates the English schools and the relationships between English school faculty, staff and students was inspirational for faculty. The post trip meeting indicates to faculty leaders that the UNF students plan to integrate some of the teaching strategies and skills they learned in Plymouth into their future American classrooms.

Faculty trip leaders also typically meet with their counterparts at the University College Plymouth to discuss pedagogy at the university level, issues in student teaching supervision, and new limits on testing in the UK. There also was much discussion on the structural similarities

and variations between the higher education and school systems. Since the international internship was established, Plymouth teachers have also traveled to Florida with their head teacher in a reciprocal relationship with the Jacksonville elementary schools several times. English and American children have become pen pals and partner in some of the assignments in their classrooms. Relationships have been established that may extend far into the future and affect our college student's goals for themselves and the student's they teach in the future.

The faculty trip leaders also spend time in discussion about the effectiveness of trip preparation activities in contrast to the group dynamics witnessed during the actual time spent abroad with the students. There is continuous refinement based on unforeseen events that may have occurred including student health or emergency situations, interpersonal conflicts that may have arisen between students, or general housekeeping matters that have an international focus. The search for funding is a constant challenge and preparation procedures are refined for each trip as faculty assess what is essential and what is only important to know. The characteristics and interests of each student group is different and requires flexibility on the part of the trip leaders in planning school placements and living accommodations in order to maximize the experience and minimize issues that may occur. The role of faculty team leader is not for everyone as it requires a holistic commitment, not only to the school supervision, but to the mental, social and emotional needs of the students, some who may have never travelled abroad or even perhaps outside of the home state.

Summation

The UNF faculty involved in the international student teaching internship is committed to continuing and improving this unique experience for students who participate. One of the future goals for the team leaders is to quantify and analyze the relationship between TLO short

and long term goals and student perceptions, reflections and outcomes in order to continually renew and refine the international experience. The student teachers from UNF become active participants in their own transformation by extending the meaningful link between what is learned in the college classroom and practiced in the American 'real world' classroom to include what is practiced in the global 'real world.' If true understanding of cultural differences and similarities must be accomplished through active engagement in field-based experiences outside the college classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), then the Plymouth internship offers our students a unique opportunity. Conversations with UNF students during the time spent abroad and after arriving back to campus, lead us to believe that they return from the international experience "changed." Initially, the students may simply gain perspective on their own strengths and weaknesses; their ability to live and work in unfamiliar circumstances and to adapt to challenging situations away from the support of family and friends. The excitement and sense of accomplishment that they bring back is just the beginning of the profound, internal changes that may occur. Global connections that the students have made personally and professionally and in their knowledge of the parallels and dissimilarities between the school systems may not be fully demonstrated until they begin to teach in their own classrooms in the U.S. We have learned and observed in our role as faculty trip leaders that classroom activities and life experiences should, whenever possible, extend beyond conventional curriculum. We advocate that short-term international student teaching internships are excellent vehicles to impart to teacher education students a greater context in which to understand themselves, the world around them, and to increase the self-confidence that will assist them in assuming adult responsibilities and as a teacher in the American educational system.

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