The Impact of a Short Term International Teaching Internship on Student Awareness and Identification of Surface and Deep Cultural Behaviors

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The study-abroad internship option for students is one example of a transformational learning opportunity that is becoming increasingly popular in programs offered by colleges and universities in the United States. For the past four years, education majors at the University of North Florida who are completing their final internship semester have had the opportunity to participate in a three week student teaching experience in Plymouth, England.

As a result of supervising the internship, the authors recognize that additional goals involving the development of culturally aware, if not culturally competent teachers was worthy of attention. We needed to study the effect of the internship on short and long term progress toward understanding the integrated set of human values and behaviors belonging to a particular group or culture, and identify and articulate possible preparation and reflection opportunities that relate to differences in surface and deep cultural experiences.

Our research of the short-term internship in Plymouth demonstrates the value of the international experience as a way to expand cross-cultural knowledge and to develop a global perspective in student teachers.

Introduction

For the past four years, pre-service teachers at the University of North Florida who are completing their final semester have had the opportunity to participate in a three week student teaching experience in primary and secondary schools in Plymouth, England. It is one of several types of transformational learning experiences that students at UNF may be exposed to during their teacher preparation program.

Study abroad options are recognized as providing significant positive benefits to a student’s growth and maturity as well as increasing their exposure to cultural diversity.
(Pence & McGillivray, 2008; Toncar & Cudmore, 2000). According to Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) international internships can improve students’ firsthand knowledge of the host culture and even transform their worldviews, yet less than 1 percent of American college students study abroad each year.

This is why many universities are implementing short-term study abroad programs, which are more cost effective and well received by participants. Although skeptics question the value of a short term program’s impact on students’ immersion into local culture, Fischer (2008) cites several benefits, including missing fewer regular classes and allowing majors with fewer electives to participate. He also notes that students demonstrate more interest in interdisciplinary studies following a study abroad and that they demonstrate more confidence and self-awareness, as well as sensitivity and patience when they return. In the area of teacher preparation, Villegas and Lucas (2002) recommend the short-term student teaching internship as an excellent mechanism for increasing the knowledge and skill sets of pre-service teachers in curricula, pedagogy, and cultural diversity.

**The UNF Internship Abroad**

After planning, implementing and supervising the UNF internship abroad for four years, we observed that our students were beginning to develop and articulate a greater sense of cultural awareness—both of their home culture in the United States and of the United Kingdom. We began to recognize the need to study the readiness of our students to participate in the life of a foreign culture and to study the effect of the internship on their short and long term progress toward understanding the integrated set of human values and behaviors that belong to a particular group or culture.

Students who participate in the internship reside in small residential townhouses on the campus of University College Plymouth where they are engaged in all activities of daily living such as shopping for groceries, cleaning house, getting to work, and meeting neighbors. They use public transportation to travel to their respective school placements, have to visit the doctor if they are ill, and make social and professional appointments. We began to actively seek student reactions to daily life in Plymouth schools and in their new community beginning with seminar discussions while living abroad, and upon returning to Florida. This article is an initial effort to understand our students’ journey in becoming more culturally aware, particularly in identifying aspects of surface and deep culture.

Students are required at the end of the internship to reflect on the experience by answering a series of prompts about their observations of cultural differences in Plymouth and England, especially in the university and city communities as a result of this experience and their responses to those differences. They were also asked about their responses or first impressions and observations in their school assignment site and how did those responses change during the three week internship and how the (international) experience assisted them in expanding their viewpoint about people, schools, and teaching including their relationships with the UK teachers, staff, and administration. Another prompt asked them to reflect on what they learned about themselves as part of a larger group and as individuals away from friends and family and what recommendations they would make to future participants?
Through these reflections, we have found that, although students carry deep cultural attributes of American customs with them, they discover many differences in the surface and deep cultures of the British, some of which they are not always prepared to deal with. After reviewing the literature associated with transformation and growth during study abroad practice teaching internships, and using our own observations and collective reflective discussions on previous internship groups, we began to focus on the students’ reactions to cultural similarities and differences. Patterns emerged in the students’ reflection papers which pointed to the participants’ perceptions regarding surface and deep cultural issues.

This article is an initial effort to explore the issues involved in helping our students’ become more culturally aware, particularly in light of the brevity of this international experience. Patterns emerged in the students’ reflections indicating that they were able to describe those elements of culture that have been identified in the literature as “surface” and “deep” culture.

**Defining Surface and Deep Culture**

Holtzman (2000) identified two levels of culture, surface and deep. Surface culture is characterized by easily identified cultural norms and refers to the tangible things that relate to and are unique to a group of people (Gonzales, 1978), including the customs and practices associated with a particular people such as the arts and crafts, intellectual achievements, historical events, spirituality, daily living, and race. Food, holidays, clothing, and folklore are often included in generalizations of ethnic groups.

Every cultural group has undergone, and is undergoing, processes of acculturation and assimilation; however, every cultural group maintains certain customs that are unique to that group. These customs and practices become associated with the group until it is difficult to think of one without the other (Gonzales, 1978). There are usually historically significant events that shape the experiences of a group in ways that contribute to both individual and cultural identity.

Many groups wish to maintain the food, music, and language of their culture and proudly display them as symbols of their distinct heritage. In many cultures, color, racial identity, and ethnicity are sources of pride that represent personal identity and heritage that are treasured and respected. Deep culture, on the other hand, often reflects less observable values, beliefs, and customs which are inherent in such rituals as child rearing practices, rules about courtship and marriage, treatment of elders, and such behaviors as the rules of conversation, socialization, and interaction with members inside and outside of the culture and family (Holtzman, 2000, Pappamiheil, 2000).

Culturally aware if not culturally competent individuals can be actively committed to understanding other cultures by reading, studying, asking questions, attending cultural events, and interacting with the people they come into contact with through international internships. Further, culturally competent individuals are not required to know everything about other cultures, but rather to have willingness and commitment to learning about customs other than their own (Holtzman, 2000).
Reflections

As we read through the student responses, it was evident that they were able to identify some shared observations of the elements of surface and deep culture. Supported by the definitions of surface and deep culture described in the literature, responses to the above questions from the students’ reflection papers were selected and categorized as follows: a) native foods, b) transportation, c) school culture, and d) respect for family time.

Native Foods

Generally considered to be easily identifiable elements of surface culture, native foods and the customs that go with them are such an important part of the human experience that when people move to a new country, their foods travel with them (Detweiler, 1978). The predisposition to try new foods serves a person well in any multicultural environment. Our students were quite verbal about their daily and weekly food preparation and consumption while in England. For example, “…the food was an experience to itself. Not only did they have different names for common foods in the U.S., but it didn’t taste the same as it did here’ and “I eventually became used to the idea of having large pieces of rare meat for breakfast, dinner for lunch, and tea for dinner.” Also, traveling to and from the store, cooking in small ovens and dealing with tiny refrigerators were issues involving food preparation and storage.

Transportation (e.g. smaller cars)

For many of our students, using public transportation presented a challenge. They live in Florida and come from a “culture of cars”. Grocery shopping always consists of coming out of a store and placing groceries in the trunk of a car. Not so in Plymouth! As one student reported, “grocery shopping was also quite an ordeal because we had to use public transportation, time the buses right, and figure out which bus would actually take us back where we needed to go (often times we were on the wrong bus).” Another student noted that the size of cars was smaller, and that may be due to the high price of “petrol” or gas. Several students were able to equate the surface issue of using public transportation to the deeper culture meanings: “English mothers travel on the buses with their children and have more time to interact with them verbally and physically.”

School Culture

In the school environment, the students commented on the differences in the role of autonomy. Some interns noted the diminished function that adults take in constantly supervising the children; “another cultural difference is the independence given to the children. In England, many of the students take public transportation or walk to school…the children are expected to be more self-reliant” and “I was impressed by the freedom the teachers have to teach throughout the day but felt very uncomfortable with the lack of structure in the classroom and their schedule.

I became more comfortable as I worked with them but I still could not fathom the lack of structure and how effective it was.” However, several comments referred to what interns took away from the experience, “…the main thing I learned abroad, give students the respect and responsibility no matter what their [the students’] capabilities.” English
students undress together in the classroom for physical exercise, which took the Americans by surprise and elicited many humorous stories, but they also noted that, “one major difference in culture that I observed was a more open view on sexuality…sexuality is a topic that is much more regulated here [in the U.S.] than in England. I was taken aback by the openness, but I also wanted to learn more about how this affected the children.”

Comments often compared familiar cultural context with their new English experience. “I had to remind myself that I am no longer in the South [in the U.S.] where people have that ‘southern hospitality’ that I am so accustomed to,” and “my patience has definitely increased being here. The students in my school are not accustomed to walking in lines and silence in the hallway. It took until the last week for me to truly realize that sometimes that is not always required. It is more of a ‘looks’ thing for the teacher.” However, one comment concluded that there is no ‘right’ way, “that is not to say that this behavior is wrong, just different.”

The student interns were overwhelming positive in their comments about their ability to accept the differences in the school culture they experienced, making statements such as, “[the teaching experience] gave me the confidence [that] I can adapt quickly to the different curriculum and the needs of the students…I am now more confident in my ability to change and adapt to my environment.” Interns also showed evidence of cultural empathy in their ability to adjust to English school culture, “I feel I have expanded my view on people, schools, and teaching. We can never truly understand someone until we’ve walked a mile in their shoes, but interacting with people of another culture has brought me closer to understanding” and “I learned that not everything is what it seems and that it is important to take a deeper look.”

Respect for Family Time

Students noted that shops shut down early (6 p.m. during the week) and many are not open on Sundays, much different than they are in the United States. One student remarked, “We take it for granted here in the States how everything and anything is open all times of the day and on Sundays.” In our discussions, it was pointed out by several students that closing early allowed for more family time- dinner together instead of running out to the mall.

This connection about the awareness of how an act (closing a shop early) can impact a family ritual, clearly relates an element of surface culture to deep culture. UNF students often embraced the differences they perceived, “people in Plymouth are more modest and appreciate the more important things in life, like family time, traveling, and friends,” and reveled in their own cultural identities, with comments like, “I discovered that I enjoyed getting to know others, educate people on what America was really like (some have the wrong impression of America), and learning about a different culture and history of where everything came from. I learned so much about America through learning about Britain and England.”
Discussion

Our investigation of the student responses as shared in their individual reflection papers resulted in some interesting and compelling observations and discoveries. We have observed that our students were able to identify elements of both surface and deep cultural issues and that this skill will serve them well as they begin to work with diverse populations of children and youth.

We found that often what one student perceived as surface culture was experienced and expressed as deep culture by another. For example, there were many comments about businesses and stores closing early without making associations to noted ‘family values’ and spending time together or the non-materialistic aspects of the English culture. In their reflections, food was addressed as a surface issue; generally they spoke of jumping in their cars and picking up fast food at home.

The time involved in planning, shopping, and preparing meals appeared to be so foreign to the interns that they failed to link it to the deeper cultural issues surrounding how people communicate through hospitality and shared dining customs even though several interns were invited into the homes of their English teachers.

In response to the reflection prompt asking for recommendations to future trip participants, the interns were quick to give advice about the differences in transportation, i.e., “they need to know that there is a lot of walking and climbing up and down hills. They need to know that things are not available that are crucial [to Americans’] needs and that they are used to...they also need to know that their transportation is not at their beck and call.” However, several students recognized that the surface issue of using public transportation could address deep culture issues of communication.

They made observations about English mothers with their children and young adults, in groups and pairs, interacting verbally and through body language in familiar and unfamiliar ways. The Plymouth residents were friendly and curious about the Americans’ southern accents and consistently expressed eagerness to hear them talk which pleased and surprised the students. Several empathetic comments were made about being the one who was different and making a connection to students in their future classrooms who may be living a different cultural experience.

Conclusion

The experience abroad offers the individual a unique opportunity for intercultural development, both surface and deep, as it involves physical and psychological transitions that engage the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. This experience occurs twice—once during entry into the host culture and again upon reentry into the home culture (Cushman, 2007). Intercultural sensitivity, increased autonomy, and openness to cultural diversity are also enhanced as a result of study abroad (Pfister, 1972).

Participants may also develop a more positive, but critical, attitude toward their home country than those who remain at home. In the end, we found that the students overwhelmingly expressed positive summations of the trip. Given the variables of former
life experiences, personality, and prior cultural competence that the participants bring with them, it is gratifying to observe that, even the more reticent student interns commented on the positive impact of the trip in their confidence in and comfort with their ability to address new situations effectively. Not a single student failed to recommend the trip to future participants.

References


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