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Internships: Dos and Don'ts; Whys and wherefores.

1. What is an internship?

The first issue is to decide what an internship is and that is not necessarily a straightforward question. We might broadly distinguish between a European model and a US model. The most widely practised model in the USA has the following characteristics:

It is not full-time and it is usually unpaid. It is essentially a learning experience (usually for credit) and not a temporary job. It would normally be subject to some form of evaluation other than that of the performance of the student as an employee.

The model more common in Europe (Sandwich placement, Stage or Practicum) is more usually a full-time position, paid, for a limited time but sometimes up to one year. It is more characteristically work experience rather than an extension to an academic course. The European model is more commonly associated with studies in vocational areas whereas an internship might be seen as relevant to most fields of academic endeavour in the USA.

Of course, there are complications. What is known as Co-op education in the USA may well have work experience that is closer to the European than the US model but for these purposes I intend to focus on the US model of unpaid internships that are offered for credit and are predominantly offered as an integral part of an academic experience. I hope that the points that I make are, in practice, somewhat relevant to the whole field of work in education but my intent is to focus essentially on the field of internships (as defined here).

2. Internship as learning experience

Unless there are clearly defined learning outcomes that are measured effectively, this area of educational enterprise is unlikely to gain parity of esteem with other academic courses. In that case, credit will be problematic or not be offered (as in the case in some institutions). In addition, internship provision will be marginalised on campus and seen as the province of the careers office.

To avoid this, the internship needs to conform to the academic norms of the institution. In practice, this means that the student should obtain departmental approval for a specific placement. Further, in the US context, credit is measured broadly through contact hours. Education outside of the classroom usually conforms to a simple formula. 3 hours of experiential education outside of the classroom is the equivalent of one hour inside the classroom. A 3-credit classroom based course would usually involve around 45 hours of classroom study. It follows that the work element of an internship should have around

135 hours of off-site participation. In addition, there ought to be some element of classroom contact during the internship so as to create space for reflection and peer exchange.¹

Further, an internship will, therefore, necessarily involve four stages that are common to any academic endeavour: Preparation, experience, reflection, evaluation.

a) Preparation:

If an internship is linked to a programme on campus within the USA, some kind of uniform preparation may be a relatively untroubled process. In study abroad, this may well be more problematic. My organisation, FIE, offers internships in Anglophone environments outside of the USA to American undergraduates drawn from many different institutions. In practice, this means that students come to us with varied levels of preparation and, consequently, we must assume that the preparation has to be done from scratch.

The major issues are:

- The common language of the US and the UK masks considerable diversity in national cultural behaviour everywhere but markedly in the workplace.
- Participants at undergraduate level may be having three forms of new encounter (on our programmes at least). They may be working for the first time in a professional context. They are in a foreign environment for the first time and, because we are situated in the centre of London, they may well be in an urban environment for the first time.

Therefore, students should not start an internship soon after arrival. At least some significant period of cultural adjustment is essential. During this time, as well as preparing for experience in the work place, students have also to undertake an intensive multi-disciplinary study of British cultural life so as to ensure that there is a context for their experience. This also creates space for the student to decide that the internship is not an appropriate experience and to opt for a purely academic path instead.

There is also a need to prepare the host employer or organisation. The notion of internships is not necessarily widely understood in many parts of Europe. A significant part of FIE's work is to prepare employers and to explain the function of the internship which is not unpaid labour (alone) but is a partnership between the student and the employer that has to be of mutual benefit. If a programme depends on the good will of employers, it will not succeed in the long run. There has to be genuine and sustainable benefit to the employer. Employers will expect continuity (that is, a more or less regular supply of interns). They will also expect the students to be well-prepared, have an appreciation for the field, and a significant level of maturity, communication skills and ability.

Furthermore, the employer also has (to some degree) to assume an educative role and see the participant as someone who can contribute if given the necessary environment in which to gain insights into the given working context. For some employers, this is an

unfamiliar challenge and one that requires education and understanding. An effective internship frequently involves educating both employer and participant.

For this reason, selection of student and employer is an important process. An employer unwilling or unable to see themselves as educators as well as managers will not create the necessary learning opportunities. Similarly, an internship may not benefit all students.

Students who do not have the motivation, the level of maturity or the skills necessary can undermine the employer relationship as well as creating a situation in which they cannot succeed. Further, an internship is not the environment in which to “try out” work experience in fields in which the participant has no expertise. A student without experience in the given field will inevitably be of little use to the employer and will, therefore, be demoted to mundane tasks. This is clearly a fail-fail situation.

There is no single manner in which to prepare participants effectively. Much will depend on institutional expertise, location and the background of students but, certainly, a period of preparation is essential as is a process of selection.

b) Experience

This is, in this context, much more problematic than it would be in a conventional classroom in so far as there are far more variables in operation. While the educational organisation can prepare the employer; it cannot maintain control over what the participant experiences in their daily environment.

Furthermore, the participant may have expectations based on limited experience that cannot reasonably be satisfied. The student who has one semester of Media Studies who wants to work in BBC productions is not an unfamiliar figure.

We also encounter the “consumer” ethos that permeates US higher education where the student anticipates (and expects) to be happy in their educational experience. The point of an internship is, at least in part, to take students from the familiar to the unfamiliar and that journey is rarely an easy or untroubled one. When you add the fact that the internship takes place overseas (with the other forms of dislocation necessarily involved in that experience), it is apparent that the students must expect some form of challenge that may well be disturbing. The education takes place because the student is taken out of their zone of psychological safety and that journey is necessarily and properly stressful. Learning takes place in a zone of unfamiliarity and unease.

Preparation is the key to training employers and preparing students for the challenge (above all, managing their expectations). I also believe that this increases the need for selection; not all students are ready to move into the less secure environment imposed upon them by the internship experience.

c) Reflection

Reflection, in this context, is guided thinking and needs to be of two kinds. There is that which is internal to the student and this can be encouraged and developed through some form of journal writing. The objective for the tutor is to move the student from narrative

to analysis. For that reason, it might be advisable to avoid the word “journal”, though much beloved of US institutions. It carries far too much of the “dear diary” connotation. With no disrespect intended, US Higher Education encourages the confessional mode of communication and one of the jobs of serious study abroad is to move students away from emotive expression towards the analytical.

The other necessary manifestation is reflection within the peer group. To this end, it is essential to have seminars running alongside the internship to create a forum for the exchange of experiences and to give tutors a space in which they can ask serious questions about the learning process. This learning space will enable the average student to contextualise their particular experience, and will enable the best student to go beyond into an analytical understanding of the field within which they are working.

d) Evaluation or grading

Like any other academic course, an internship needs to be evaluated. While student evaluation of their experience gives sometimes useful feedback, the focus in this context is on the academic evaluation of student performance i.e. grading. The elements that comprise that evaluation will include attendance and participation (how effective an employee was the student), and learning outcomes (how good a learner was the student in the environment). The most important element in evaluation should, significantly, be the learning outcome and this has to be measured in terms of the quality of information and understanding achieved. This will almost certainly involve the participant in writing an extended essay. There needs to be an absolute and direct interaction between theory and

practice to validate the whole. In this sense, the internship (when properly conceived) exactly enacts John Dewey's dictum: "There is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education."²

3. The value of internships

In one sense, I have tried to be less than whole hearted in my endorsement of internships precisely because there are real barriers for students to cross and because we have not always been entirely realistic in endorsing the process. The rhetoric tends to mask the reality. I am also uneasy about the internship that is offered without academic support of the kind outlined earlier.

That said, there are many reasons to value internships as part of the educational process. Crudely, these objectives are achieved: Students gain practical experience and that enhances a sense of the real context of academic knowledge. There are very few areas of intellectual activity (arguably none) where there is not a direct correlation between the thought and the deed: the campus and the outside world. While this is obvious in the vocational fields and the applied disciplines of, for example, medicine, engineering, architecture, business and so on it may not be quite as apparent in other fields. My contention is that the value of these experiences can be demonstrated even in what might appear to be the unlikely context of the mainstream humanities. A few remarks on the teaching and learning of English literature might clarify the position.

I do not believe that it is possible to understand culture without understanding how that culture is transmitted, nor do I believe that it is possible to talk about literary reputation purely in aesthetic terms. To some degree, literary reputation is a by-product of marketing. If there is truth in that assertion, the interaction of creativity and publishing is deeply relevant as are questions of retailing, reviewing, media presentation, television adaptation, journalism and so on. A student of literature can gain considerable insight into the nature of cultural transmission and the question of literary reputation by participating in working life in a bookshop, in a literary agent's office, with a T.V. company, or with a newspaper. Instead of being defensive about this, we might ask how it is possible to understand literature without some comprehension of the reality of those contexts whether we explore them directly, through an internship for example, or through a consideration of the degree to which cultural artefacts are commodities, marketed and sold in much the same way as any other. The study of literature can with real intellectual consistency be related to the world of commerce.

Similarly, a student of history could benefit from time spent in an internship in a museum. Such experience could clearly demonstrate the subjectivity of historical narrative. Versions of history, alternative narratives, are constructed by the way in which objects are acquired, displayed, labelled and visually related to each other. The relative significance given to an artefact indicates a point-of-view and a perspective, or set of perspectives, on history. A museum is no less a historical narrative than a text. The British Museum, for example, contains remarkably little that originated in Britain but is, instead, a monument to Britain's great colonial past and its unparalleled capacity for

theft. A museum is also very clearly an institution facing commercial pressures, monetary restraints and so on that we associate with more conventional businesses.

In another context, how can Art History be really understood without a comprehension of the role of galleries and agents? The interaction between creativity and the business of marketing that creativity is fundamental. One implication is that there is a need now to go beyond a defensive position that seeks to justify some form of work experience in education. The question we ought to ask is how traditional courses can claim to educate students fully when, and if, they fail to demonstrate (in one way or another) the context in which the discipline functions.

Another strong reason for seeing internships as a key part of education is simply that students demand it. In the new economic realities students are, for good or ill, consumers of expensive services. Students are empowered to make choices and make demands about the kind of education they are being offered. One demand that will grow is for university education to be useful in relation to finding employment in an increasingly competitive environment. An internship experience is a significant mechanism that enables students to enhance their curriculum vitae (resumes) and to overcome the rather vicious circular trap which requires young people to have some experience but which will not enable them to get that experience.

4. Conclusion: The International Dimension

I want to end with a few remarks on the implications of internships in study abroad:

a) Study abroad models

The internship in the US mode is not universally seen as a necessary part of academic life in many countries nor is it offered in many national higher education systems. A simple implication of this is that institutions wanting to offer students this experience will need to move away from direct enrolment models in national university systems (most of them in fact) where internship provision is not the norm. In practice, this will mean setting up and managing their own programmes (with all the difficulty that that implies) or working with organisations in those locations familiar with the national working ethos, the needs of US higher education, and the dos and don'ts of internships that I've tried to outline.

It is also necessary to recognise that the provision of effective internships makes heavy demands on financial and human resources. Not all institutions are willing or able to make that kind of investment.

b) An integrated learning model

It is clear that study abroad ought to be an integrated learning experience in that it explodes the boundaries of the classroom. The learning environment necessarily becomes wider, encompassing the streets through which the participant moves, the people encountered, the buildings entered. It is also clear that an internship further expands these learning locations to include the workplace. That said, mere encounters will not necessarily bring enlightenment. As old Plato tells us, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Students

need to be given tools through which these encounters can be processed. These tools may well include some form of basic ethnographic research methodology, some form of training in understanding signs (basic semiotics) and so on. It is for that reason that I believe internships without academic support are not a significant form of education. They may well have other kinds of value but a significant learning opportunity is lost if the experience is not integrated into academic work in some direct way.

c) Cultural Immersion

It is also certainly arguable that an experience in a working environment abroad is, in many respects, a more effective means of engaging with another culture than that offered by studying on a campus that is, in many respects, like that of the home institution. A classroom in Poughkeepsie (for example) is not a profoundly different environment from a classroom in London, Madrid or Erehwon. Internships abroad, in contrast, force students to encounter diversity. In short, they experience another culture as a participant rather than an observer and that is, as old Shakespeare tells us “a consummation devoutly to be wished”.

¹ This may, of course modify the number of hours required in the work place.

² John Dewey, Experience and Education, Collier Macmillan, New York, 1938, pp. 19–20.