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# Key Components Contributing to Student Development and Cross-Cultural Adaptation During an International Internship

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**Abstract:** *Globalization has been a motivating factor for institutions of higher education to reassess their mission statements and consider to how best prepare students for an increasingly globalized world (Green et al., 2008). As a result, universities are developing programs and initiatives to assist in this effort including on and off campus international learning experiences (American Council on Education, 2017). One of these initiatives is the field of education abroad. This narrative research study presents the experiences of university students who participated in an international internship and highlights the factors of their internship success and integration into the host community.*

**Keywords:** International internships, international education, student development, narrative inquiry, digital storytelling.

## INTRODUCTION

The education abroad umbrella covers many facets of study abroad programs including traditional study abroad, study at a foreign university, research, service or teaching abroad, or international internships – which is the focus of this study (Altbach & Knight, 2007). International internships are scenarios in which students can apply their scholastic learning in an international work environment. They can be credit or non-credit bearing, paid or unpaid, and circumstances can vary wildly for which party pays for travel and host country accommodations.

The growth of international internships has been tremendous. The Open Doors Report, reports that in the 2018-2019 school year, 38,120 students did noncredit work, internships, or volunteering abroad (Institute for International Education, 2020), whereas during the 2012-2013 school year, there were 15,098 (Institute for International Education, 2014). The number of participants in these programs more than doubled over the course of six years.

## PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research was to identify key components that contributed to the student's international internship success as well as their ability to adapt to the host

country/community.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed narrative research as a research method. In narrative research, participant stories are used as a means of data gathering stories from participants as a means to understand one's life experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In turn, the data can be presented in storied form (Polkinghorne, 1995). This study utilized creative non-fiction storytelling (Kim, 2016), and digital storytelling, including live-action film, animated illustrations and photo story, to share the participants' life experiences (Barone, 2007; Gubrium, 2009). A link to these stories is included at the end of this paper.

Study participants included six university students in the College of Humanities at Canyon University (pseudonym). They did internships in England, Germany, Peru or the Dominican Republic. Each participant was interviewed three times, for 1.5 hours each utilizing Seidman's "three interview series" (Seidman, 2013, p. 20) and semi-structured questions. Participants were invited to bring artifacts from their internship experience including photos, souvenirs, journal entries, or work-based artifacts as a springboard to share stories and narratives. Kim (2016) states, artifacts can be used "as a way to excavate further stories from our research participants" (p. 177). A researcher's journal was also utilized to document insights and for reflective practice during the research process.

## FINDINGS

The findings of this study are represented in excerpts of the six participant's stories. These excerpts illustrate their internship experiences and the factors that contributed to and inhibited their development, and overall success. While the stories collected are significantly more comprehensive, for the purposes of this paper, only a few abbreviated stories are shared to highlight the major findings.

Daphne, an English major, did her internship in England at the English Historical Society (a pseudonym), in the Special Collections department. She narrates her experience working on a podcast project as part of her work and the skills she developed.

The Podcast Project was quite extensive. I really enjoyed this project and it was totally out of my realm. My initial instructions were minimal; it was basically, 'Hey, will you look at podcasts? We're wanting to do more podcasts and so we want to look at our previous ten podcasts, - what worked, what didn't, where should we go from here.' In the end, I did a lot more than just filling in the gaps like they originally asked. I created an extensive business report. It contained the analytics of their previous podcast, which topics were more appealing, and what similar organizations were doing. It also included proposed resources, funding, and personnel considerations. I basically set them up so all they needed was the resources. After I gave a presentation on my research with the report, the head of the Digital Department told me, 'I want everything that you've done and I wish you could be here a bit longer to do this' (Daphne, interview 3).

Sierra, a Latin American Studies major, did her internship at a non-profit organization in

Peru. She discusses her internship responsibilities.

So, we were to do research, but despite the training and instructions, there was this cloud of ambiguity with the internship. Honestly, Lily and I would look at each other and ask, “What are we doing again? What exactly is our job? What is our role?” That was a theme throughout my internship that made it difficult—this ambiguity of what we were supposed to be doing (Sierra, interview 1).

Trevor, a Spanish Major and International Studies minor, did his internship working for a non-profit organization in the Dominican Republic. He recounts his experiences with his mentor.

Mr. Rodriguez was very dedicated to making sure we had a good cultural experience in addition to our work experience. He would use his paid time off to take us to the beach, or travel, or things like that. We would often leave early for our evening English training meetings so he could take us to unique local places BEFORE we went to the meeting. It wasn't uncommon for him to say, “Ok, we're leaving the office, and we're going to take a two hour lunch today.” And then we would go over to his condo or to a restaurant. And at his condo, his wife would teach us how to cook a traditional Dominican meal. That relationship with him really transformed the entire experience for us (Trevor, interview 3).

Julia, a Public Relations major, also did her internship at the English Historical Society, but worked in the Digital Media Department. This section illustrates her work interactions with another intern, who is from England.

After I'd been at my internship for a while, another intern showed up from a university in England. Her name was Molly and for the first month, it was kind of awkward because she and I didn't really know what to talk about. Then one day my supervisor asked us to work on a social media campaign together. Social media is probably my least favorite part of Public Relations, I'm just not good at it. Molly on the other hand was great at making posts fun and casual. Every Tuesday, Molly and I would go around taking pictures and looking up facts to use for our posts. Basically anything I know about social media, Molly taught me. Molly also taught me all sorts of really random things about England: differences in their education system, how they pronounce words differently, and how to recognize where people are from by their accents (Julia, interview 2).

Anita, a German major, did an internship at a chocolate factory in Germany. In this story, she describes her work and challenges she experienced while on the internship.

The first few weeks, the internship was fine, because I was learning new things and it was really different. But after awhile, it was the same thing over and over again. I was actually pretty lonely. I didn't have a lot of people around that I could REALLY talk to. I wasn't close to my co-workers, and I didn't know many locals outside of work. I didn't have a strong connection with anyone in particular, and it takes me awhile to open up to someone. Also work was boring which was

frustrating and I began dreading going to work some days. To be honest, I felt those feelings of loneliness and dread a good portion of the time (Anita, interview 3).

Scarlett, a double major in English and Human Development, did her internship at the English Historical Society. She discusses her living situation with other interns from her university.

I think it's important to do an experience like this WITH PEOPLE. I think the internship experience, whether it's international or not, the more isolated you feel, the less of a positive and beneficial experience it's going to be. I think it really meant a lot, that we were there in the community of the Historical Society with these people that were very kind to us, but also that we university students had each other, the fellow interns. I think that really made a BIG difference in our internship experience. The fact that we had a place to come back to at night, in this sort of quasi-home with each other, so that if there was anything, culturally or at work, that was troubling to us, or difficult, or just funny, that we could come home and talk about it with like-minded people, and have that as a space where we could work through things. That was a really helpful aspect of our internship experience that I think not everyone had that I've spoken to, and it sounds like it was a difference maker (Scarlett, interview 3).

## DISCUSSION

Based on the student's stories, and through narrative analysis and analysis of narratives, I identified five key components that contribute to student growth and cross-cultural adaptation during an international internship. Narrative analysis gathers information drawn from interviews and other data sources, and assembles it into a logical, flowing story (Polkinghorne, 1995), while analysis of narratives is the process of identifying common themes and patterns within the narratives (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). Again, through these processes, five key components surfaced as being contributing factors to student growth and cross-cultural adaptation during the international internship experience. Each component contributed to the success of the international internship while a lack of each component adversely affected the experience. The five key components are presented in Figure 1.

The five key components are:

### 1) PERSONAL PREPARATION AND CAPACITY

The student's ability to experience growth and adaptation initiated with their own internal abilities and knowledge including: student's understanding of host country and language, their openness to the new environment and people, and the capacity to navigate the new environment and working through challenges. Five of the six participants, for the most part, demonstrated a high degree of personal preparation and capacity. Anita however, struggled. It was difficult for her to navigate some of the work challenges she experienced and develop work and personal relationships. In turn, this affected the other components that contributed to growth and adaptation. When students were culturally, academically, and emotionally prepared, they were more likely to experience success in the other components that lead to student growth and adaptation.

## **2) SUFFICIENT, CHALLENGING AND SATISFYING WORK**

Interns were more likely to experience personal growth, develop professional work skills, gain greater understanding of the field/industry and experience emotional well-being when there was sufficient, challenging and satisfying work. Those who lacked work or had unclear work expectations had fewer opportunities for growth and it adversely affected their emotional well-being. Of the six participants, three of them described having sufficient amount of work for their working hours, work that challenged them, and work that provided them a sense of personal satisfaction. Daphne's excerpt illustrates this –her podcast project was something she had never before done, but was robust, engaging and through the process, she developed new skills. The other three described lacking work, and/or having work that was monotonous or required little skill.

Sierra expressed frustration that despite having received training for her internship work, it was simply too ambiguous and open ended. She wished for a more prescribed protocol in her work, and follow up conversations with supervisors did not always yield that result.

## **3) AN ENGAGED MENTOR**

An engaged mentor, or work supervisor typically would ensure there was sufficient, challenging and engaging work, providing instruction and training, and check in regularly about the work and goals and show a personal interest in the student. When an engaged mentor was present, students felt sense of belonging and camaraderie at the work site, and gained an increased knowledge of the field/industry. They gained understanding of the host country and culture and had a sense of well-being. All of the participants were assigned on site work mentors, however the degree of mentorship provided varied greatly. Daphne, Scarlett, and Julia's experiences demonstrated a mentor who was invested in all aspects of the internship and work environment including; being actively invested in the work they were assigned, exposing them to the work industry, and helping them build relationships within the work environment. Trevor's excerpt illustrates how his mentor was invested in providing him with rich cultural experience and exposing Trevor to major landmarks and communities. Anita's mentor was present at the work facility, but not always helpful when she needed more work to do. Sierra, had the least amount of supervised work and consistently involved mentor.

## **4) HAVING A SECURE ON-SITE HOME BASE**

A secure on-site home base refers to interns relating to and feeling friendship and camaraderie with their roommate(s) in the host environment. By having a friend, they had a sense of security and could debrief about cultural differences and challenges, and someone to explore the country with. When a secure on-site home base was not present, students were more likely to stay in their apartment and expressed loneliness or frustration. Scarlett discusses the benefits of having other interns from her university as roommates – they served as support systems and helped them have a sense of security in a unfamiliar place. Anita, however had the opposite experience. Her roommate was also an intern from her university, but she describes their relationship as “a friendship out of necessity” and as a result, experienced extreme loneliness (Anita, interview 2).

## **5) A CULTURAL GUIDE**

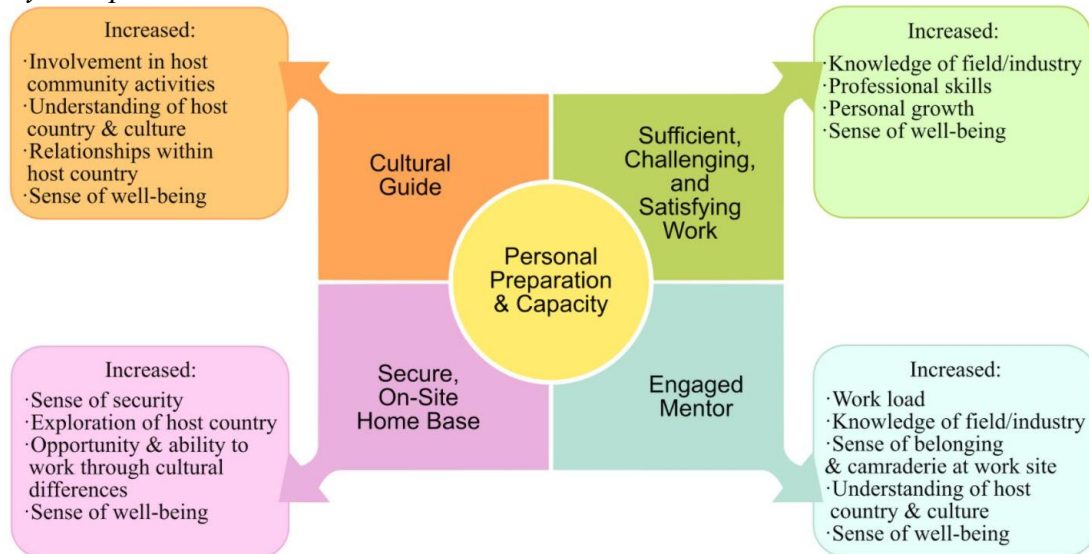
A cultural guide was a host local that mentored the students in the new culture and community. These individuals varied in their role within the internship; a community member, colleague or supervisor. In many cases, students had multiple cultural guides, and these

interactions led them to having increased community involvement, a deeper understanding of the host nation, culture and customs, increased relationships, and a sense of well-being.

Julia’s story illustrates this as she recounts her friends with another intern, Molly. Julia not only learned more about social media from Molly, but she also served as a cultural coach, teaching her about England, their education systems, and language. All the participants shared about someone that had been a cultural guide to some degree: a co-worker, a supervisor, or someone in the community. Anita had somewhat of a cultural guide in her supervisor, but it was minimal and was the only person that served in that role during her internship experience.

Based on this research, when these five components were present, the students demonstrated increased overall growth, and increased adaptation. Conversely, when they did not experience these factors, or if they lacked one or more of them, their overall growth was hindered, as was their ability to experience cross-cultural adaptation.

**Figure 1**  
*Five Key Components*



*Note.* From *Crossing Cultures: A Narrative Inquiry into Undergraduate College Students’ Experiences in International Internships* by K. D. Jensen, 2021, p.189, Doctoral Dissertation

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In closing, these five key components are crucial elements in the students’ international internship success. It is recommended that international internship stakeholders, including university representatives, host site representative, and the student, be informed of the importance of each component, to do what they can to assure all these elements are present during the internship experience. They are shared responsibilities among the stakeholders; no one individual can assure they are all present.

The stories of the participants can be viewed at the link below. They are represented in various digital storytelling modes including: a live action film, animated illustrations, and a photostory.

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1TgszZZEWoW8fQ3I5cnm7r0leZTqbtvIK?usp=sharing>

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