

Discussion on International Internship and Intercultural Competence from a Perspective of Higher Educational Internationalization -- A Case Study of the Program Work and Travel USA

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Received 15 August 2012; accepted 24 October 2012

Abstract

With the advent of globalization, the higher education in China is facing a hot topic that it is how to educate students with international views. The paper aims to discuss a new way to educate students with intercultural competence through international internship. Therefore, the paper firstly introduces the developmental history of international internship including the program Work and Travel USA as an important educational program of the internationalized education and multicultural education in the United States, explicates the basic definitions of intercultural competence and international internship, and relationship between international internship and intercultural competence. Finally, the author sums up the important functions of the program Work and Travel USA are of benefit to the students' intercultural communicative skills, intercultural working experiences and intercultural understanding, so as to enhance students' intercultural competence and cultivate students with international views. And then, the international internship will be an effective measure to educate internationalized talents in China.

Key words: Higher education; Internationalization; Internship; Intercultural competence

ZHANG Xiaochi (2012). Discussion on International Internship and Intercultural Competence from a Perspective of Higher Educational Internationalization -- A Case Study of the Program Work and Travel USA. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(5), 62-66. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120805.934> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120805.934>

INTRODUCTION

The globalization trend has brought forth a highly interdependent and interconnected world, in which face to face or via Internet interactions for people from different cultural backgrounds have become a norm of daily life. Intercultural communication competence, or the ability to interact appropriately and effectively with people of differing cultures in order to achieve communication goals, therefore becomes a prerequisite for people in the 21st century to live successfully and productively and further establish a peaceful and harmonious global community (Chen, 2010). Thus, establishing a new sense of "community" and learning to become a "global citizen" are the keys to survival in human society. A new sense of "community" manifests inclusiveness that draws together people of different races, ethnicities and genders; it mirrors the acceptance of cultural diversity (Chen, 2010).

At the present time, the world is becoming a small "global village", everyone in the world is becoming a "global citizen". Especially the young citizens from various countries are eager to learn firsthand about the social, economic and environmental impacts of globalization. Therefore, higher education for internationalized talents with intercultural competence is a new concept, and includes teaching and learning objectives to take students out of their colleges and universities to become active in interns of other foreign countries, and then they will obtain life-changing experiences.

"With these experiences came the hope to develop as a cross-cultural bridge person who could help westerners to understand China and the Chinese to understand other cultures" (Kulich, 2010). Therefore, frequent communication between different nations and peoples for economic, political, cultural and educational needs at national as well as individual levels has now turned intercultural communication into reality for all nations and people in this age of globalization and multiculturalization. The coexistence of interdependence

and cultural conflicts demands all cultures and nations to go beyond their own cultural bondage and learn to appreciate different ideas and different ways of life, to share with others limited world resources, and to celebrate diversity. Consequently, international internship for effective intercultural communication competence has become one of intercultural competence training models.

1. INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIP

Generally, internship exist in a wide variety of various industries and setting. An internship may be paid, unpaid or partially paid (in the form of a stipend). Paid internships are common in professional fields including medical, architecture, science, engineering, law, business (especially accounting and finance) technology and advertising fields. Non-profit charities and think tanks have unpaid, volunteer positions. Internships may be part-time or full-time -- typically, they are part-time during the university year and full-time in the summer. They usually last 6-12 weeks, but can be shorter or longer, depending on the company involved. The act of job shadowing may also constitute interning (Wikipedia, 2012).

1.1 What Is International Internship?

International internship is a little bit different than a internship in the home country. It makes interns self-confident and independent. Also it is the best way to learn the language of that country. The interns will learn about the foreign culture, behavior, food, people and a lot more. Especially in the international internship the university students will learn not only about the country they are, but also they will also learn about many other countries and people. And the most important one is that they will make some many friends.

International internship has a long history in the United States of America. After World War II, the United States of America carried out the internationalized education and multicultural education, and delivered "Fulbright Act". And then many American Fund Associations and international organizations pushed serials of international exchange programs and internship programs for university students, tour study in the United States of America to travel and work in European countries during their summer vacations, so as to accumulate their multicultural experiences and promote their intercultural communication competences. Since 90s of 20 century, the globalization education, international education and multicultural education have been further developing and rapidly expanding in the United States of America. Such programs as "International Student Teaching", "Overseas Student Teaching" and "Global Student Teaching" have been implemented. At the same time, foreign government offices have introduced similar programs. One is the Global Fellowship Program, a six-week summer project funded by the United Kingdom. The program, which was

started in 2008, each year sends 100 students selected from across the U.K. to one of three rising countries -- China, India and Brazil. The largest number of students, 40, come to China every year (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003).

1.2 The Program Work and Travel USA

"Work and Travel USA" is the largest program of international cultural exchange that allows students of different countries of the world to depart on summer vacations to USA, working and resting (traveling). The primary purpose of the program is an assistance of distribution culture USA in the world, exchange spiritual values between the young people of different countries of the world and Americans, acquaintance with modern life of the United States. Now, the Work and Travel USA is a program run by the United States government. Under this program, international students can legally enter the US for 4 months during their vacations and work for US employers. This program is beneficial both for US-based businesses who use seasonal staffing to cover their rising work force needs during the busy month, and for students who get a perspective on American culture, travel, and earn money (Wikipedia, 2012).

At present, thousands of overseas students have been enrolled in this program since it was started. By a program founder, and also, its main supervisor is Department of State, what determines the necessary amount of students which have a right to take part in the program Work and Travel USA annually. Companies -- representatives of the program Work and Travel USA in different countries of the world register students in the program, and help to get all are needed documents and consultations. Also some agencies help program participants to plan trip to the future place of work, give possibility to purchase international airline tickets on students tariffs (SPANZPL, 2012). The program candidate should get on in year vide 18 to 23, have a colloquial level of English and then necessarily be a full-time student of university. The program is intended for students, who wish to familiarize with a culture of USA, rest and begin to earn money and to work during summer vacations. On the terms of the program, students leave on work in the USA (on jobs, vacancy and condition of work and payment, are certain), earn the certain sum of money and, at pleasure, outlay it on a trip on America, or other entertainments or things, so as to facilitate their intercultural competence.

2. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

"Intercultural" is related to interpersonal related to identity and individual. It is not about discovering the facts or encouraging stereotypes, but involving young people in a flow/process where they act together and discover each other and empty space being filled with a process of discovery. It was important to ensure the flexibility and

adaptability of the program, to adapt to a new country and to a new culture. Due to the students' personal experience had different perspectives, they should improve their intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence is a term that can be applied by many different people for many different reasons. As a result, the definitions change depending on the angle at which people are looking at it from, or from the context.

2.1 What Is Intercultural Competence?

Intercultural competence is the body of knowledge and skills to successfully interact with people from other ethnic, religious, cultural, national, and geographic groups. When someone has a high degree of intercultural competence, they are able to have successful interactions with people from different groups. People must be curious about other cultures, sensitive to cultural differences, and also willing to modify their behavior as a sign of respect for other cultures (Chen & Starosta, 1996).

"Intercultural competence" means that a student understands a variety of significant cultural experiences and/or achievements of individuals who are identified by ethnicity, race, religion, gender, physical/mental disability, or sexual orientation, the cultural history of various social groups within a society, the interrelations between dominant and non-dominant cultures, either in the United States or elsewhere, and the dynamics of difference" (Sinicrope, 2012).

In general the essence of intercultural competence can be summed up as the ability to work/interact well across cultures. So, intercultural competence is the fundamental acceptance of people who are different to oneself outside one's own culture/the ability to interact with them in a genuinely constructive manner which is free of negative attitude (e.g. prejudice, defensiveness, apathy, aggression etc./the ability to create a synthesis, something which is neither "mine" nor "yours", but which is genuinely new and would not have been possible had we not combined our different backgrounds and approaches (Schmid, 2009).

2.2 Relationship Between International Internship and Intercultural Competence

In recent year there has been an increasing appeal for students to participate in significant international internship during their university careers. Students who take part in international internship abroad are expected to show improvement in attitudes related to international knowledge. Those attitudes and associated skills may also benefit them in other career-related ways, such as the development of broader intercultural awareness and respect for cultural diversity. One of the most important potential benefits of international international internship relates to the development of skills that enhance the capability for future intercultural learning.

Chuprina (2001) found intercultural competence was positively correlated with the willingness to

engage in self-directed learning, which is autonomous learning undertaken in response to new situations and environments. Therefore, intercultural competence is a relatively unexamined aspect of international internship. The majority of research conducted on international internship has focused either on modifying similar variables to those of face-to-face participants of intern or on examining how technology and/or virtual environments impact effectiveness. To address this knowledge gap, many cases revealed that intercultural competence may improve the effectiveness of internship. Meanwhile, internship will enhance students' intercultural competence through real cultural context and contact. So, international internship has played a good role in improving intercultural competence.

3. IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIP

From the above discussion, we may see that the program Work and Travel USA made important concepts come across to the participants in a very clear and practical way, showing the students not only how to resolve common intercultural issues, but also how to apply these important concepts in a real work and travel situation. The program was extremely benefit to all the Chinese students involving this program. It helped the students to develop a better understanding American culture and comprehend why things are the way they are. The experiences from Work and Travel USA gave the Chinese students tremendous insights into the American way of thinking, especially taking away lots of valuable lessons on how to collaborate with people from other cultural backgrounds. In order to further study on the important functions of international internship, the author conducted a research study on the intern that five students from China West Normal University took part in Work and Travel USA in 2010 and obtained three key findings.

3.1 Intercultural Communicative Skills

Imagine being able to work anywhere in the USA for up to 18 months in a job directly related to your field of studies or to your career or professional qualifications. In China, most of the Chinese university students have learned English language very hard and also how paid much more attention to reading and writing, rather than listening and speaking. Especially, in our southwestern part of China, the English listening and comprehending of most university students are very poor. Although the students form the Work and Travel USA program lived in an English environment of America for only 5 months, they all thought they had made a great progress in English, particularly in listening and comprehending.

Student A: When I came to the United States, I felt totally lost my voice, (because I could not speak English,

didn't understand what American said and did not know how to communicate with the local American people, but later I found there was no big problem for me to communicate with local Americans.

3.2 Intercultural Working Experience

That's the unique opportunity that awaits you through the Work and Travel USA. It is the kind of experience that will make your CV stand out from the pack and add a whole new dimension to your skills base. The students in our university for USA Work and Travel program always said, "working in the United States is real-life experience, we really enjoy working here so much. In China, schooling has been her life over the years and the students had never tried anything like this before." The students have been to the United States for work, they do not expect there to make much money, but it is a good preparation for life.

Today, a university degree does not guarantee a job after university in China. The workforce becomes increasingly competitive as job availability fluctuates during a recession. In response, university students strive even more today to make themselves appealing to future employers. Students not only work toward good grades but also add jobs and extracurricular activities to their resume.

Acquiring time abroad and becoming culturally diverse is another way students build their resume as they gain life experience. Many students worked in the farms, restaurants, hotels and malls because of the experience they have gained. Meanwhile, they have made some good friends from different countries in the United States, had a lot of fun, and learned some lessons from. Especially, the students have understood how to pay more attention to detail because of their jobs.

At the same time, the student realized, "What's more, we understand that making money is not that easy and communicating is not that difficult when you take the initiative to take to others". They have also learned to be financially independent.

3.3 Intercultural Understanding

The USA is the most diverse and dynamic economy on earth and US employers are eager to introduce international trainees to their workplace. You'll gain front line experience, learn about the latest developments in your field and make valuable career contacts. All of which add up to an important boost in your career credentials.

As a Chinese saying goes, "Traveling 10000 mile is more helpful than reading 1000 books to gain knowledge." The students of this program have never traveled abroad and would try to fit in with the environment, culture and food there. They thought that "It is important to travel because it gave the students an advantage in the workforce. Our world is moving towards a global economy and if you travel, you're more likely to go

overseas one day for your job. To have good knowledge of other cultures is important to show future employers." Through the travel, the students enjoyed talking with Americans, and then they know a lot of things about the real American families. They compare Chinese families with American families. They know "Chinese parents care very much that their parents did well. Chinese students do not have to do chores or help around the house or things that American students normally do. Chinese parents take care of everything so that students can spend all their time focusing on school as opposed to American where parents want their kids to be involved in sports, participate in extracurricular activities, do well in school, do chores at home, and have a job. In the United States, the college student is more independent and has lower pressure than in China."

Many students of this program thought "It is only when you are in the country can you know the real country's basic condition or state such as culture, economy, politics." There is an old Chinese saying that traveling is better than reading. Students can learn many things from traveling which cannot be obtained from books.

Thus, traveling in the United States can provide students with not only a chance to get away on a mini-vacation, but it can also provide students with advantages like the opportunity to know more knowledge about the real American culture and to improve their intercultural communication competence, so as to make themselves more appealing to future employers.

CONCLUSION

The experience of the internship in the Work and Travel USA program is, of course, not merely a cultural adventure. Working and traveling in the U.S.A involves changes like moving to different accommodation, workplaces, often surviving with just the essential belongings that can be fit into a rucksack, being separated from one's established social circles, family and friends. In the cases of cooks, farmers, salespersons, babysitter and so on, the students for the Work and Travel USA program, may be facing his/her first experience of such full-time work. Therefore, the students might have many difficulties in dealing with these changes in different circumstance, and could be confused with the "culture shock".

The program Work and Travel USA is attractive not only for the Chinese students without working experience, and adds a unique experience to the students resume. Many students who have been to America acclaimed the program is their life-changing experience. "It will not only be a highlight on their resume, but more in their life history." However, the gap between western countries like U.S. and China is decreasing. Two big countries like the U.S. and China should cooperate with each other to do something for the world. So that the main motivation declared by the program's participants

concerns with: the possibility to gain new experience, to feel independent, to improve language skills, also can be observed the tendency of subjective diminution of the financial motivation, which essentially is the fundamental. No doubt, through this internship program, the students' intercultural competence should have been increased. Meanwhile, the program made important concepts come across to the participants (the Chinese students) in a very clear and practical way, showing the attendees not only how to resolve common cross-cultural issues, but also how to apply these important concepts in a real work and life situation. Meanwhile, international internship is worthy further research for the Chinese educators and experts, and will be an effective measure to educate internationalized talents in China.

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