Enhancing the Transformative Potential of Business Internships

David Starr-Glass

Business internships involve students, sponsoring firms, and institutions of higher learning. As part of a program to enhance internships, we reviewed the experience of a small number of business interns working in Central Europe. Their experiences were characterized as essentially situation-specific learning, competence training, and affirmation of coursework. Student perceptions suggest prematurely defined boundaries that limit the theoretical advantages of internships. In order to enhance the internship experience, we suggest redesigning, sustaining, and evaluating internships emphasizing transferable learning, discovery of self in work, reflection and process, liminal experiences, and challenging espoused theory. We suggest that such redefined internships may optimize learning opportunities and the growth of human and social capital for all stakeholders, which are of particular benefit in the transforming business contexts of central and southern Europe.

Key Words: business internships, experiential learning, career, transitional economies, transforming education

JEL *Classification:* I21, I23, J24

Introduction

Potentially, collegiate internships provide constructive and insightful experiences for all stakeholders, namely the participating student interns, sponsoring firms, and collegiate initiators. As an accredited American college operating in the Czech Republic, we were interested in creating local internships for our senior business students; however, the resulting internships were more a product of personal connections than of thoughtful design, or concern, for all stakeholders involved. In common with many other transforming social and economic environments, the economies of Central Europe are characterized by an impetus for change, residual inertia from previous totalitarian command economies, slowly developing managerial confidence, and challenges and possibilities for career development (White 2005). These task environment characteris-

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Managing Global Transitions 4 (4): 285–297

tics suggest challenging opportunities for local firms, new business graduates entering the job market, and local institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, our initial internships were more concerned with student interest, and narrower practical and pragmatic issues.

This paper results from the experiences of a small group of students who successfully completed internships with our college in Central and South Eastern Europe. We were interested in understanding their assumptions about internships and the ways in which they structured the internship experience to negotiate relationships and roles. However, we believe that uncritical and pragmatic student assumptions and experiences may also have resulted in what we understand as 'self-limiting internships', which provide impoverished learning opportunities for all stakeholders. Before considering the specifics of student perception, we will examine the general models and theoretical foundations upon which professional and collegiate internships are constructed.

Internship Models: Professional and Collegiate

In America, professional internships have a long history in fields such as architecture, education, engineering, and medicine. When associated with a profession, internships center on the acquisition of a corpus of specialist and technical knowledge under the supervision, authority, and jurisdiction of a designated professional body. In this setting, internships serve many functions: defining the profession, socializing the novice, and lending the credence of competence to the various publics that lie outside the profession (Wilensky 1964).

In professional internships, power and authority are asymmetrically distributed, being almost exclusively located in the sponsoring organization. Traditionally, educational goals have focused on the specific with experiences geared to train interns in given tasks, to shape their work behavior, and to socialize them into the language, conventions, and norms of the profession. Increasingly, however, professional bodies have viewed these goals as excessively focused, or restrictive, and have sought to broaden the educational goals. For example, the revised internship regulations in architecture (Quinn 2003), and school leadership (Williams, Matthews, and Baugh 2004), point to such a purpose.

Collegiate internship programs initially mirrored professional internship models. In what is reputedly the first such program – an accounting internship at the University of Cincinnati in 1906 (Henry, Razzouk, and Hoverland 1988) – a narrow range of skill acquisition, professional so-

cialization, and limited generalizable learning were all emphasized. It is unclear whether this was the result of purposeful design or default. The loci of power, supervision, authority, and jurisdiction in collegiate internships are different: they are shifted from a narrow, pragmatically defined profession to the more educationally diffuse academy. Potentially, such a shift might have been expected to lead to a broader educational perspective; however, this has not generally been the case.

Within American business education, internship opportunities have increased dramatically over the last 25 years. In 1980, only about 3% of undergraduates had been interns, but by the year 2000 that number had risen to more than 50% (Coco 2000). More students were involved, but the perceived legitimacy of the internship had also increased. In a recent study of 242 business departments, almost all of them (91%) offered internship programs as an undergraduate option. Students were equally enthusiastic with almost a third (32%) having been interns by their junior year; even more (39%) opting for this experience in their senior year (Coco 2000).

Early research showed that students perceived internships as supplementing or enhancing their academic studies (Hite and Bellizzi 1986). Perceptions regarding academic benefits have persisted and strengthened (Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn 2004). Students have also increasingly considered that a positive internship experience correlated with subsequent hiring success (Scott 1992); that a differential hiring advantage existed *vis-à-vis* non-interns (Pianko 1996); and that internships provided opportunities for wider job searches including the chance to explore different business sectors and to sample organizational contexts (Cannon and Arnold 1998). Many of these perceptions seem realistic. For instance, speculation that successful internships are associated with improved academic and employment outcomes proved to be generally accurate (Knouse, Tanner, and Harris 1999), although the nature of that relationship may be more subtle and tenuous (Gault, Redington, and Schlager 2000).

As an accredited American college with an international program in the Czech Republic, we tacitly accepted that our business students would have similarly positive perceptions regarding successful internships. In their senior year, our students must complete a capstone experience that can be either a supervised dissertation or internship. In Czech higher education, the dissertation is a standard element in earning a degree and it is understandable that, given this cultural preference, most of our stu-

dents complete a dissertation. However, a small but increasing number of students has completed the internship option. We wished to examine the experiences of these students as part of a process of increasing the quantity, and enhancing the quality, of internship offerings.

Methodology

Twelve students completed business internships within the last two years. All but one had completed the internship for academic credit; the exception used her internship experiences indirectly as the basis of a formal dissertation. Internships were carried out in Czech Republic (8), Austria (1), Croatia (1), Hungary (1), and Slovakia (1). Most interns were male (9), reflecting the composition of the student body. Sponsoring firms were equally divided between small (often family) businesses (6) and international companies (6). Interns typically served a minimum of 150-hours in quality assurance, marketing, and sales departments of mainly service sector industries.

To qualify for academic credit, students were required to maintain a reflective journal and write a series of short papers on relevant theoretical issues connected with the experience. We reviewed the journals and papers that had been submitted and also conducted unstructured individual exit interviews with interns, where we sought their opinions and impressions of the experience. We analyzed all of this material for themes and linkages without imposing restrictive *a priori* data classification (Adam and Schvaneveldt 1985; Shaffir and Stebbins 1991). We believe that this resulted in a purposeful exploration of intern experiences, 'less driven by specific hypotheses . . . more concerned with emergent themes' (Cassel and Symond 1994, 4).

We appreciate that our conclusions are limited in their generalizability by the small number of interns and the purposeful sampling employed. We recognize that a fuller and richer appreciation of the impact of internships would have been gained had we also interviewed corporate supervisors associated with the internships. Anecdotal feedback suggests that this relationship was generally very formal and bureaucratic; only occasionally did an informal mentoring scenario develop. We do not consider that the benefits of the internship experience accrue only for the intern; we consider that it is more likely that such benefits arise within the context of the shared interaction between all stakeholders. In a subsequent phase of this study we plan to capture the reactions, attitudes, and understandings of those working with interns in the sponsoring firm.

How Interns Perceived their Experiences

Six perceptions emerged from our analysis: (1) situation specific learning; (2) competence training; (3) product and instrumentality; (4) terminal engagements; (5) acceptance practice encountered; and, (6) 'coloring between the lines'. This cluster of perceptions can be seen as describing the internship experience; however, as we will suggest later, it can also be seen as setting implicit although unarticulated boundaries, and limits, on the experience.

Situation Specific Learning. In selecting and undertaking internships, students saw them as providing specific and focused utility. All interns reported positive and enjoyable experiences but saw those experiences not in a general social terms but as associated with specific tasks, or interests, in the firm. On completing the internship, learning gains and experience was considered limited to the tasks and departments within which the intern was involved.

Competence Training. Many students saw a culmination, or confirmation, of their theoretical business studies in the workplace. There was a broadly held sense of the dichotomy between theoretical underpinnings and a more robust work world. Often, students came to see differences between what they have learned and what the corporate sponsor actually did. While comparing, questioning, and reflecting on differences is undoubtedly valuable, interns generally considered that they were learning new skills and approaches rather than reflecting on difference.

Product and Instrumentality. Most internships were understood as focused on a product, or specific outcome: completing an assigned project, assisting with a special report, etc. If there was an educational element it was associated with the work product rather than with the process by which that product was completed. Interns placed value on new skills and competencies, and internships were perceived as providing valuable assets for future employment, or for career – at least as an addendum to the intern's resumé.

Terminal Engagements. In our program, as is generally the case in America (Coco 2000), students completed internships in their senior year. Perhaps because of this positioning, the internship was perceived as a terminal academic engagement rather than as the beginning of a career, or a transition between the two. Interns often saw their experiences in terms of psychological closure with respect to their academic studies. We spec-

ulate that internships perceived as terminal engagements result not only in interns seeing themselves as temporary and transient participants, but being considered as such by sponsoring firms.

Acceptance of Practices Encountered. Students often saw internship as contexts for testing the academic knowledge they had acquired. Sometimes, they discover that what they have been told in the classroom, or had been led to believe was done, clashed with their work experience. Sometimes interns came to appreciate that the sponsoring firm had different priorities and practices. Internships represent socialization experiences, where business or professional norms and culture are explored. They are also potentially intellectual and learning experiences. However, interns generally elected to affirm work practices with which they were confronted and rarely challenged, corrected, or expressed concern if they felt that practice did not conform to prior academic knowledge. This was variously attributed to politeness, uncertainty, lack of empowerment, or a sense that such differences should not be shared.

Coloring Between the Lines. This theme, which is similar to the last, describes an attitude, sometimes expressed as a strategy, associated with limited engagement in the sponsoring firm. Interns saw their 150-hours engagement and visitor status, as circumscribing their ability to alter the organizations in which they were hosted. They saw the internship as something that was to be completed successfully and expeditiously and engaged in 'color between the lines': conforming to organizational rules, accepting existing organizational culture, and diligently completing their projects. A lack of actual power, or a perceived sense of lack of empowerment, led to the limitation of criticism and the consideration of more creative approaches to the tasks that they were given. 'Coloring between the lines' was more concerned with observing organizational norms rather than with work practices and procedures.

Capstone Experiences and their Liminal Possibilities

Internships, like any social arrangement, can develop into systems that do not distribute power, cost, and benefit symmetrically. Internships that provide optimal advantages for all stakeholders distribute learning benefits to all those engaged in the process. When there is a more even distribution of benefits, stakeholders are encouraged to maximize their investment by sharing and contributing to the system rather than seeking short-term, private gains. Collegiate business internships – which bring

together capable students, interested firms, and far-sighted colleges – are essentially synergistic: capable of producing more benefits than their individual resources might indicate possible.

Synergism is desirable in all internship programs, however within the context of transforming societies and economies the possibility of generating synergistic outcomes is particularly salient. By moving all participants beyond self-perceived boundaries for engagement and interaction, internships can become powerful ways of disseminating knowledge, initiating information networks, and promoting productive reflection on practice. Thus conceived, internships can act as pathways that allow for the flow of information and innovation. Internships can also set the scene for an increase in both personal and social capital within the system constituted by stakeholders – a point we shall return to later.

Internships become self-limiting when stakeholders define, or anticipate, learning objectives or program outcomes that are excessively narrow, specific, or non-generalizable. Internships can certainly be narrow training experiences and as such they will have limited short-term advantages to stakeholders. However, they can also be understood as much richer educational and experiential opportunities. For all parties to benefit from such opportunities, care must be taken in setting, and communicating, learning outcomes that are useful to interns, sponsoring firms, and collegiate initiator.

Potentially, internships represent a powerful form of capstone experience in professional education. Capstone experiences can be defined as (Fairchild and Taylor 2000): 'Culminating experiences in which students synthesize subject-matter knowledge they have acquired, integrate cross-disciplinary knowledge, and connect theory and applications in preparation for entry into a career.'

Significantly, from the outset, capstone experiences were recognized as being vital social experiences, marking *rites de passage* between academic study and the work-world, and allowing for liminal introspection and adjustment (Durel 1993). In the mechanics of initiating and supporting internships, the significance of the *rite de passage* and the powerful liminal space that these experiences offer is often marginalized by more pressing administrative, technical, and practical requirements.

Internships perceived by stakeholders as excessively instrumental, become mere functional arrangements that lack – or at least do not allow sufficient room for – liminal consideration. Often, students do not appreciate the complexity of the transition from structured college learning

to self-directed work life and career. They may see the present and the future, as it were, but remain unclear about middle stage in the tripartite *rite de passage* – the liminal stage, which provides psychological space and social ambiguity for the transition (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969).

Rites de passage are not limited to students. In contexts where organization, or the economics and societies within which they are embedded, are themselves in transition, liminal opportunities provide the chance for members of the sponsoring organization to reframe, reorder, and represent change. The internship can thus serve as a liminal space in which all stakeholders – not simply the interns – can meet and reconsider past and future. Liminality requires a dislocation from previous norms, roles, and expectations: Victor Turner (1969) referred to it as a 'moment in and out of time'. Moments in and out of time are beneficial for individuals, or organizations, moving from one state to another.

REFRAMING INTERNSHIPS: ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES

The themes that emerged from the experiences of our interns were descriptive of their experience; however, we see them as also representing limits prematurely imposed on the internship experience. Compared with the language of richness, liminal quality, and space for adjustment (Durel 1993), interns described an experience that was much more limited and bounded.

We believe that the original richness of the internship experience is particularly salient for business graduates and organizations in Central Europe. We also believe that this experiential richness can be reinstated. To do this, we suggest that internships should be constructed around six dimensions that contrast with those revealed in our analysis. These dimensions, which must be clearly articulated as learning objectives and supported institutionally throughout the internships, are: (1) generalizable and transferable learning; (2) discovery of self in work; (3) reflection and process; (4) liminal experiences; (5) challenging and reconsidering theory; and, (6) considering transformational possibilities. We will consider briefly what we mean by each of these.

GENERALIZABLE AND TRANSFERABLE LEARNING

This can involve: (a) an integration of 'theory and practice, classroom learning, and professional experience', and (b) 'learning how to learn from experience' (Clark 2003). The collegiate-sponsored business internship is primarily a learning experience, not a work commitment. Expe-

riential learning that is encouraged and supported is most valuable to the intern when the experiences can be reflected upon and generalized. Skills acquired, and knowledge gained, are optimized when they can be transferred from a specific task environment to a broader one.

DISCOVERY OF SELF IN THE WORK

The internship can lead specific competencies and skills but it can also provide a much broader challenge: discovering something about the nature of work and about ourselves. While interns have previously seen narrow range competence acquisition as important, the nature of work and of career continues to change significantly (Arnold 1997). Adaptability, innovation, a greater propensity to work with others, and personal ownership of career trajectories all mean that intra- and interpersonal skills are increasingly required in the workplace.

Interns, rather than leaning more about what to do, can begin to understand why things are done and often done in ways that seem strange and counterintuitive. For example, while an internship can enhance specific marketing skills this does not preclude using the experience to gain a deeper insight into the culture of the workplace, distribution of power, organizational behavior, and the politics and dynamics of change.

REFLECTION AND PROCESS

Work experiences can provide the basis for understandings about self and generalizable knowledge of organization contexts, but this requires interns to reflect on what is being done, or being experienced (Kolb 1984). Argyris and Schön (1978) characterized this as 'double loop learning'; Schön (1987) as 'reflective practice'. Sue Campbell Clark (2003) suggests strategies such as requiring interns to produce academic work products regarding their experiences, give presentations, keep daily journals, and focus on interpersonal competencies within the work setting. Reflection encourages students to consider what they have encountered to recognize the process of which they have been a part. Reflection challenges interns not to consider themselves passive in the internship experience, but rather as active observers and commentators on their work engagement.

LIMINAL EXPERIENCES

Internships neither mark the end of academic studies nor the beginning of employment: they exist as an interface between the two. We believe

that students should be advised and helped to view the internship as a liminal experience (Gennep 1960) – a 'threshold' period disconnected from, but related to, an academic past and a work-centered future. Liminal experiences present an opportunity for participants to detached from the ongoing process of 'becoming' and consider their present more critically: 'the characteristics . . . are ambiguous; he [sic] passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state' (Turner 1969, 94). A focus on liminality allows interns to recognize the 'living moment' from which they can consider the structures that shaped their academic pasts and the work engagements that will shape their futures.

CHALLENGING AND RECONSIDERING THEORY

Interns are eager to see their coursework and theory in action. They want to understand the applicability of what they have learned, and to impress their sponsors with their ability to perform. They consider themselves lacking organizational power and are not usually empowered by the firm in which they are working. We consider that they should be at least minimally empowered, perhaps through formalized mentoring programs, and encouraged to reappraise and reconsider theory in practice. We should demand that interns consider critically the extent to which theoretical positions and explanations are helpful in their work context. Internships should provide students with the opportunity to make up their own minds on matters that have often been presented in the classroom as remote, confirmed, and immutable. Internships should also encourage interns to communicate and share these experiences and findings with the firms that they have worked with.

TRANSFORMATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

Rather than internships being regarded as passive events, we see them as a powerful confluence of benefits and opportunities for all stakeholders. Rather than focusing on limited, short-term benefits, interest internships should be recast as the opportunity for student and organizational learning. Rather than color between the lines we see the opportunity, and the resulting benefit, for novel, creative, and challenging engagements between interns and their sponsors. Again, such an opportunity cannot lead to truly transformational possibilities unless there is a reconsideration of not only the scope but also the power associated with internships.

Managing Global Transitions

Conclusion

Potentially, internships are powerful experiences for all stakeholders. They bring interns who are engaged – sometimes thoughtfully, sometimes not – with their own *rites de passage* into work environments that, while often seeming stable, are not themselves immune from the turbulence of internal and external environments. They often bring together different perspectives, knowledge, and outlooks. Internships are most powerful when they allow reconsideration, new learning, and reflection to take place among those involved.

Internships are not costless, and often the sponsoring organization questions the use of resources, or sees the intern as a source of free, or cheap, labor (Scott 1992). However, rather than being understood as short-term costs, internships can be more productively viewed as long-term investments in both human and social capital. Internships create new networks, which would probably never have existed otherwise, between participating actors. These networks allow for the flow of information, creation of personal contacts, and may provide bridging social capital within the wider community (Granovetter 1973). We recognize that in the transformative economies within which our internships have taken, or will take place, one of the post-communist legacies has been an erosion of social capital (Fidrmuc and Gerxhami 2005; Paldam and Svendsen 2001). Internships, viewed and organized as investments in social capital, may be more attractive to all stakeholders rather than when considered as limited investments in human capital.

While students see internships as being useful and positive experiences, they also view them in a manner that restricts an expression of the richer possibilities of the engagement. Interns, and those providing internships possibilities, may benefit from a more carefully articulated understanding of the possibilities afforded by these learning experiences and a more active support system during the actual engagement. Internships provide multiple benefits for all stakeholders but, our analysis suggests that many of these benefits – such as the possibility of a liminal space, room for reflection on the nature and process of the job, synergistic linkages, and bridging social capital investments – are not being utilized. Of the three stakeholders, it is the initiating institution of higher learning that is best placed to redefine the learning goals and possibilities of internships and to provide an academic framework not only for ensuring that academic credit is awarded for valid educational experiences,

but also for allowing the other participants to obtain optimal benefit. Interns need to be better prepared for the learning opportunities that internships provide; encouraged to recognize short-term assumptions and limits of instrumentality in the internship; and receive ongoing support in their process of reflection on the experience. Likewise, sponsoring organizations should be helped to view internship programs as long-term human and social capital investments, benefiting all those who engage in the process.

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