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Reflective Essay: EDUC 994

Kimberley Daly

George Mason University

Introduction

Originally, when I first started thinking about what I would like to do for the requirements for EDUC 994, my first thoughts were that I would like to go to work with the International Baccalaureate Research Unit (IBRU) which was then situated at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom. Because my dissertation leanings are towards the idea of completing a North American study concerning university perception of the International Baccalaureate (IB) and I was aware of two studies completed in this area, I wanted to go to the IBRU because I wanted to learn the methodology used with the previous studies and have contact with some of the people who actually worked on these studies. In addition, the University of Bath also is approved by IB for the Teacher Award Scheme, as is George Mason University. Because my secondary concentration is teacher education, I thought going to the University of Bath and observing another teacher education program, especially another authorized IB teacher award scheme, would provide me with additional insights about how educators learn. I was particularly interested in comparing differences in teacher education in the United States and another country and going to the United Kingdom would give me the opportunity to observe classes and hopefully, interact with other student/teachers.

When the original proposal for me to go to Bath for EDUC was made, the IBRU was still in existence. That was November 2008. However, by January 2009, the IBRU was shut down and by April 2009 all the materials were cleared out of the offices at the University. In the meantime, at George Mason, there was a period of time when I was revising what I could do and what I could get academically out of an internship period in England. In actuality, I was not aware of the shutdown of the IBRU. During this time period (Spring 2009), I was also enrolled in EDUC 894 with Dr. Jorge Osterling and was working on a final paper for that class titled “University Perceptions of College Readiness and the International Baccalaureate Diploma

Programme.” In the course of completing that paper, I interviewed Sandra Wade-Pauly, university liaison at IB’s Vancouver Office. Ms. Wade-Pauly suggested that given my dissertation goals, it might make for a good internship for me to come to IB’s Vancouver office since they work with university and global recognition. I found myself with two opportunities for the summer and eventually had to decide what I would do – go to England with a revised plan, go to Vancouver, or try to do both. I decided to do both and wrote an internship proposal that had me completing interviews of scholars of international education and research while learning about teacher education and higher education abroad in England and then traveling to Vancouver, Canada, to work in IB’s Vancouver office, primarily focusing on university and global recognition.

England and the University of Bath

I spent just over three weeks in England. My time at the University of Bath was spent on a variety of activities and I had an ample amount of free time during which I could pursue my own research interests. Dr. Mary Hayden was my supervisor during my stay and in addition to agreeing to supervise my internship and make various arrangements with the University of Bath, she also consented to let me interview her regarding her time working for IB. In addition, I was able to interview Professor Jeff Thompson regarding the history of the IBRU and IB research in general. Also while in Bath, Professor Thompson and I discussed the methodology of both of the completed perception studies in terms of IB (the UK study and the Australian/ACER study) and briefly talked about possibilities for a North American study. Both Professor Thompson and Dr. Hayden thoroughly answered any question I had and Dr. Hayden especially was very detailed about higher education in England. I didn’t realize how everything that she was explaining to me would click until several weeks later when I was in the IB Vancouver office

and was asked to work on a white paper concerning IB and possible “tuning processes” based on Bologna that are being proposed for the United States. As I was doing much of the reading for the assignment I was given by IB, many of the things that Dr. Hayden told me in Bath made sense and helped me quite a bit.

Another opportunity that now seems open to me again is the idea of publishing. Professor Thompson asked me about this during one of our meetings and I am actually interested in getting involved in this activity again. After completing my interview with Professor Thompson, I was invited to consider a project or idea to work on with a mind towards publication. During my time in Bath, I did develop an idea for a possible research project and sent Professor Thompson an email which asked him to meet to discuss the idea. After talking to him about research that has been completed and knowing that IB seems to focus on students who complete the Diploma, I started to wonder about the following: What are the reasons that students choose to do the Diploma or not to do the Diploma? In addition: Why do students drop out of the Diploma Programme before they complete it? I discussed if there was a way I could complete some kind of a study that could find out the reasons for this. I was thinking that I had a good potential sample within Fairfax County – eight IB schools to possibly work from, plus I know who many of the coordinators are and even know some of them personally. He thought this was an interesting idea and agreed to advise me on it as well. I suspect that I will need to think about a manageable sample, which school or schools to work with, Human Subject Review Board issues, school district issues, and lastly, survey design. I am hoping to get this project completed during spring semester, when I plan to take my qualitative methods course. Between September and December, I am hoping that I can do all of the planning, survey design and HSRB paperwork so that I can complete the actual survey work and data analysis in the spring. I

was thinking that actually having a “live” project to work on will make qualitative methods much easier for me to grasp and understand.

In addition to my interactions with Dr. Hayden and Professor Thompson, I also took part in a graduate course during my final week at the University of Bath titled, “Leading and Managing International Schools” and taught by Mike Fertig. The course dealt with leadership issues particularly in international schools. All of the students in this course were currently teaching in international schools and all of the schools offered the IB Programme, although not all of the schools were Diploma Programme (DP) schools. The leadership issues that were discussed in the course – hiring, evaluation, retention, induction, and accreditation were all very interesting for me to learn about but some of the issues that face international schools abroad are not exactly the same for a public school in the United States that offers the DP. In addition, as I listened to some of the students in the class speak about the students who come to their schools, I was reminded of some of the differences between IB schools in the United States and outside of the United States. For one graduate student at Bath, nationals of the host country could not attend their school. For other students in the class, the tuition limited who could attend their schools. The issue of equal access to IB was interesting to many of my colleagues when I explained that any student who wants to take an IB course can take an IB course in my public school as this is not the case in their schools. As I have not had much contact with the international school system, I found this course quite interesting and was happy to broaden my base of knowledge in this way.

In addition to my formal interactions at Bath, I was fortunate to have time for less formal, but probably just as valuable student interaction and library time. I lived in student housing on the university campus and that afforded me the opportunity to interact with students on various

levels, including M.A., Ed.D., and Ph.D. students. I attended an annual student research conference sponsored by the Department of Education during which I heard presentations by students on all three levels. In addition, the research presentations were at all from all ends of the spectrum for the students; one presentation on internationalism at a British university was delivered by a student who just received only received her Ed.D. degree the day before, while another, a presentation on educational research and cultural diversity was by a Ph.D. candidate who had completed a lot of research but had not really started to whittle down what his final dissertation writing would focus on. It was interesting to see the form and structure of some of the presentations, especially since I currently do not have much experience in this arena. As I viewed the students, I was careful to pay attention to how these presentations might have been mindful of their audiences and what they were trying to convey. I also kept asking myself if the presentation I was watching was successful in conveying the intended information. One thing that I did notice in Bath as opposed to educational presentations I have attended in the United States is that these presentations seemed less linear to me and didn't quite fit into some of the models of organization for presentations that I have seen in the past. For instance, only one presenter (and this was a professor who spoke about working with supervisors) provided handouts and although some presenters used Power Point, there was not the reliance on this method as there seems to be in the professional workshops and presentations I have attended in recent years. Is this a difference between cultures or a difference in the preparation level of the presenters since they are still students?

While living with other students, I found time to discuss my interests, the doctoral program I was undertaking, and the research I interested in. On the other side, and sometimes over pints in a pub, I learned a lot about the requirements for graduate degrees in England, how

the Bologna Process is changing higher education, and how a doctoral degree differs in the United States and in Europe. I was fortunate to come in contact with students who worked in Greece, the Netherlands, Japan, Turkey, Thailand, and other places. Many of the students I frequently congregated with were taking a course called “Research Methods” for two weeks and part of either the Ed.D. or the Ph.D. program at Bath. In addition, one of the students, James MacDonald, actually wrote one of the articles that were discussed in the international schools course so it was nice to be able to discuss a topic with the actual researcher. I found it fascinating to hear about everyone’s research interests and made many good contacts during my time in Bath. Many of the students who attend Bath’s summer school program either currently teach in international schools or have in the past. Some also have administrative roles or work in government agencies.

The final major activity in Bath that was extremely valuable to me was the time that I was able to spend in the university library. I used this time to gather and read things that I might consider valuable to me in the future. As doctoral students are always looking for more time available to them to be able to read yet another article or another text, I was perfectly fine with sitting in the library and using the computer system and Bath’s resources to see what I could find concerning IB. I ended up reading six theses and dissertations, all with some IB subject matter. I rationalized, perhaps incorrectly but at present I am not sure of this, that if I read several of these I will have a better understanding of how to write one in the future. In addition, I thought that if I studied theses and dissertations with IB as a subject, I would become more familiar with more of the literature. I am aware that no one has attempted a North American study dealing with university perception and I am also attentive to the fact that literature in this area is mainly anecdotal. Because of this issue, I have been trying to read as much as I can related to IB in the

hopes that I would stumble across something that is not anecdotal and have also been reading methods sections in dissertations and theses in an effort to wrap my head around both qualitative and quantitative methods design as I am sensing at this point that I have to complete some kind of mixed methods work when I complete my final dissertation.

IB Vancouver

I spent thirty-six hours home in Virginia before I flew to Vancouver. I worked from 15 July until 7 August, 2009 at IB's Vancouver office. My supervisor there was Bob Poole. This regional office for IB focuses on university and global recognition and while there, I worked on several projects that I found both interesting to my own interests and it seems, possibly of use to IB's offices in other places, particularly, New York.

While in Vancouver, I completed seven main projects, although I also participated in the general office and took part in an IB Communications Workshop that was delivered remotely from New York. This workshop was actually very valuable to me, as it provided me with all of the channels by which IB delivers information to stakeholders both within the organization and outside of the organization. The workshop was interactive and allowed me to see what new things were also on the horizon in terms of communication for IB, including a digital interface.

What I found out in Vancouver was that in some cases I ended up researching and writing papers for projects that the Vancouver office will eventually push for funding later with the larger IB organization. One of those projects was a paper providing a rationale for access to the ACCRAO Electronic Database for Global Education or ACCRAO EDGE. ACCRAO (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers) is already known to the Vancouver office and they regularly work with members of ACCRAO in regards to IB

Diploma university recognition policies. ACCRAO EDGE is a database that lists countries and their educational policies regarding secondary education, including what types of credentials are offered in each country and what test scores are required for students to obtain a secondary diploma or a school leaving certificate. It is used by admissions officers and registrars in the United States to review credentials from foreign countries and given that IB currently has 1,335 Diploma schools in 125 countries (as of July 2009), it seemed logical that the Vancouver office should have an account for this. The one sample country provided for the database, Ghana, did not list an IB Diploma as a valid credential even though there are Diploma Programme (DP) schools in Ghana. By having access to this database, the Vancouver office could monitor the nations where they did have DP schools and try to correct information that they found to be erroneous as one of the goals of the Vancouver office is trying to get the Diploma recognized more widely in North American universities.

Another project that I worked on while in Vancouver was a white paper regarding the Bologna process and its relevance to IB. This paper required me to do quite a bit of background reading on Bologna itself, as I had not had much previous experience with Bologna or with the structure of higher education outside of the United States. Thankfully, due to my experience in Bath, I was a little further ahead in my understanding of European higher education and mainly focused on reading about the Bologna Declaration. In addition, the Vancouver office wanted me to see how one aspect of the Bologna Process, the idea of “tuning” degrees might work in the United States and what possible implications that could possibly have for an organization like IB. “Tuning” refers to the idea that all of the skills for a particular degree will be the same across a geographic area so that practitioners of that career all are guaranteed to know the same material no matter what university they attended as long as they attained a bachelor’s degree. In

the United States, three states were mentioned as starting efforts to look at determining what skills make up specific degrees. In Indiana, universities are reviewing education, history, and chemistry. Utah is looking at history and physics and Minnesota is reviewing graphic design and chemistry. This ‘tuning’ effort is being led by the Lumina Foundation for Education and Clifford Adelman of the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is working with them while in Europe, this process is ongoing. Currently, 137 universities in 16 countries have reached agreements on 9 subjects. As far as relevance for IB, I thought that If these “tuning” efforts go well in a state that IB is trying to get in the door with in terms of university recognition, then perhaps universities might also be amenable to looking at a unified policy in terms of Diploma Programme (DP) recognition instead of each university deciding individual credit for certificates. In states where IB already has good recognition policies, “tuning efforts” could only help in attempts to get unified statewide Diploma policies. Currently, the IB DP receives recognition from each American university on a case by case basis.

One assignment that I was very interested to work on in Vancouver was an outline for a North American university perception study. At present, no North American university perception study has been completed and after being in Bath and working in Vancouver, it has become more and more apparent to me that this is what I would eventually like to attempt for my dissertation. I was asked to complete an outline for a complete study, along the lines of the studies previously completed in England and in Australia. The Vancouver office was very keen that the methodology of any full-scale North American would match as close as possible to the previous perception studies. Keeping that in mind, I focused my proposal on three main ideas: various approaches to reduce sample size in the United States, two and four year colleges, and a separation of the United States and Canada. I felt reducing the sample size in the United States

was particularly important because the United States currently has over 5,700 institutions of higher education. Canada has over 300. Both of these numbers exceed the sample size of the UK and the Australian studies. In addition, I also thought it might be a good idea to separate two- and four-year colleges as some questions might be able to be specifically tailored to these institutions or address the idea of students who later transfer to the four-year colleges. I found this entire exercise very useful as it forced me to consider how I might want to eventually want to do my dissertation and it also allowed me to bounce ideas for my dissertation (an entirely different approach from the proposal I wrote for IB Vancouver) off the two senior staff members in Vancouver.

Yet another project I worked on in Vancouver came as a result of my professional life and current events. Because I teach IB English A1 in my professional life, I was able to provide the IB Vancouver office with a written response as to how the draft Common Core State Standards released by the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers fit into the current IB English A1 program. As there has been much recent discussion about whether IB programs prepare students for university level work and David Conley and the Center for Educational Policy research have evaluated IB programs for knowledge and skills that contribute to university success (KSUS), IB is concerned about how their various programs might fit into the new National Standards Project. 46 states have currently signed onto the project with only Texas, Alaska, South Carolina, and Missouri being the holdouts. The Common Core State Standards have currently been released in a draft form and are expected to be finalized later in 2009 and 2010.

Finally, I worked on two other projects while in Vancouver. The first was to research and develop a spreadsheet of organizations that IB might want to build relationships with if they

did not presently have them. I was instructed that this list should be focused on educational and professional associations and should be global as it would not only be used in Vancouver for recognition work but also by staff in other regional offices of IB. Although the task was pretty simple research-wise and involved finding names, addresses, and basic contact information, I found this information useful to me in a fact-finding capability as it made me aware of many of the organizations that dealt with international education, international schools, recognition of foreign credentials, comparable professional organizations to my own discipline abroad, and other agencies that I was not already aware of. The last project was two-pronged and involved first creating a rubric that could be used to compare university policies globally and then creating a kind of “cheat-sheet” guide that could be used in conjunction with that same rubric by those people who would be rating university policies in North America. It was generally understood by my supervisors and me that although IB seems to be moving towards wanting everything that is newly created to be “global” there is a definite difference between universities in North America and other parts of the world in their perception of IB and although a rubric could be applied to university policies some guiding questions were needed to go along with a rubric. As I work with IB rubrics most of the school year and generally know the acceptable language, I worked very hard to write a rubric that could be applied not only to a university in the United States but to an institution of higher education in Europe or Asia that doesn’t have the Diploma Programme credit recognition issues that the United States struggles with. Likewise, knowing the unique issues that the Vancouver office deals with, I developed a list of guiding questions that went along with each area of the rubric and could be used in conjunction with the rubric to evaluate policies in North America. These projects were valuable because it made me think how something had to have global implications and I could not only think in terms of applying

something to the United States or even North America. I had to be very careful with language and make sure that I was consistent across all levels of the rubric I was developing with a mind that this could be used in not only North America, but in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. As I was working on this project, I found out that the rubric I was developing was to be passed up to New York so that feedback could later be obtained from others in Europe and Asia as well.

Conclusion

Although I have summarized and reflected on my learning in the paragraphs and pages above, I am certain that I have probably not even scraped the surface of how traveling this summer to both the University of Bath and IB Vancouver affected and will affect my doctoral studies. Often, I think we may not realize the true effect of things until much later in time. I believe that although the actual activity of the travel and the short time between the two countries back in Virginia was difficult, the benefits to my studies and my time completing the requirements for EDUC 994 far outweigh any negatives.