Reporting Questions IE3 Internship

Questions #1
1.What are your initial impressions of the organization and an overview and thoughts about the kind of work you've started doing; how does the work match your expectations, how does it match your goals:
The organization matched my expectations in terms of the work they did, however I was a little thrown off at the way they organize tasks and run their office. It is a perfectly legitimate way to do things, but being from a different culture I am used to a lot more clarity in the workplace- which is fine. I have been finding my comfort zone at work. It matches my final career goals, in that it is a non-profit organization which spans countries and involves advocacy, community involvement, and community development. I have learned a lot already in these first two weeks.

2.What stood out to you the most regarding your arrival:
I think the smoginess of the air as well as how many people were on motorbikes. I'm used to everyone being in cars but not this many people on bikes! And without helmets, no less!

3. What was your greatest anxiety prior to departing and how do you feel about that now that you have arrived:
My initial and biggest anxiety was the language barrier. I was fully aware that everyone in the country spoke Thai as the norm and was very scared that I would be confused and lost all the time. I have memorized several Thai phrases, and am starting a more formal lesson this week. It hasn't been as difficult as I imagined, and everyone has been very patient and kind with me.

Questions #2
1. How are things at work:
I usually come in and sometimes I have to find something to do, or other times there may already be a project I’m working on and I continue with it. It was difficult at first adjusting to the slower paced office culture here, but I think I’ve finally gotten the swing of things. When they give me a task, I’ve found that the important thing is to do it carefully rather than quickly. I often make myself available to all the staff, and have spent quite a bit of time building relationships with everyone in the office. Often times in when I don’t have anything specific to work on I will go around and catch up with the staff on how they are doing, learn some Thai, converse in English, etc. I was given the task of teaching a couple Thai girls English every Sunday- which has been a lot of fun. I get to make my own lessons plans with the help of the in-house English staff, and they are very sweet girls who are getting sponsored to study at a private school through the foundation. Most of the time they seem to not understand me, but they show up every Sunday at 4 ready to learn and with smiles on their faces. It’s a learning experience for all of us! As far as professional goals go, I’ve settled into the fact that the experience of seeing an international non-profit run efficiently, as well as malfunction is the main lesson. I will not be able to fix everything here in my short stay, but I’ve taken upon myself the task of revamping the volunteer program at the park to make is slightly more efficient. I basically give out feedback forms all the time and then collect them, gather the feedback and compile a list of things which could be changed or edited to make the experience better. Before I leave I intend on constructing a simple plan on how to address these things, and presenting it to my director. If she likes it, she will pass it on to the founder, and if the founder approves of even one change- I will feel accomplished.

2. Personal Goals:
I really wish I had more time here so that I could really learn Thai. I have several phrases and words down, but I think it’s far fetched to achieve fluency in just three months! I have dictionaries and even a interactive language guides, but here everyone is so eager to make their English better that they would rather speak with me in English than in Thai! I want to focus more on my Thai learning the next half of my internship. Otherwise, I think I’ve done a good job in terms of taking it easy, reading a lot and making friends! I definitely have a handful of Thai friends now, and spend time with them quite often. I will be really sad to leave.

3. Cross Cultural Goals:
Things are going really well. The first few weeks were an adjustment- coming from the directness and fast pace of US to the indirectness and slower life of Thailand. But I think I’ve managed to fit in fairly well by paying special attention to my language and attempting to be respectful in every situation. The experience which stood out most has basically been the fact that everything changes at the drop of a hat. I could show up to work Monday and find out that I’m leaving to the mountains for a week in an hour, and have to run home to grab my things. Going with the flow is a BIG part of being comfortable and happy here, and I’ve made it an ongoing goal. I am happy now!

Questions #3
1. Day in the Life:
I usually get up around 7am to get ready for work. Walk to the office, which is only about  5 minutes away and get breakfast. I either grab some sort of pastry or roll from a bakery and bring it to work with me, or if I get up early enough, I sit in a cafe and can get a fairly cheap and big breakfast. My work schedule is from 8-5 with a one hour lunch break at noon in between. I get lunch with some coworkers or by myself across the street on my break. The foundation pays for one meal every day, so I have two restaurants to chose from- both of which are delicious. I prefer the one adjacent to the office, because it has fresher ingredients and better vegetarian options. After work I usually take a walk through the city, find a cafe and sit and read or journal for a while. Then I find some place for dinner. Sometimes, I will just get street food which you can either sit down and eat right there or take with you. Other times, if I feel like straying from Thai I will find a restaurant and spend a couple dollars more on Italian, Greek or Mexican. Lately, I’ve made friends with more locals, so they have been inviting me out to dinner at their favorite places. The non-touristey side of Thai food is so much better (though more difficult for me, because I’m vegetarian).  Afterwards I head back to my apartment and wind down for the evening by either reading, playing my ukelele or catching up with family and friends back home.

2. Housing:
I didn’t have to take care of my housing situation- the foundation arranged it all. I only have to pay my utility and internet bill at the front desk at the beginning of every month, which comes out to about 5 dollars. The apartment I have is fully furnished with a bed, a shelf, a wardrobe and a small desk and chair. I have my own bathroom with a hot-water shower, which has been really nice. There are sheets, blankets and pillows, but one thing I’ve had a harder time with is finding a towel. I forgot to bring one with me, and with some difficulty was able to find one at the daily market- but it is more like a tablecloth than a towel! There isn’t a kitchen, which I was a little disappointed about because I like to cook. But there are many food options open very late so it hasn't’ been a problem. There is really nothing I regret about my housing situation- it is comfortable and works out really well for me. There is always someone at the front desk downstairs and access to the upper floors is through a key-card, which makes me feel safe. I am very thankful. The only thing which I find difficult is the amount of noise that comes in from the street- even though the apartment faces a small side street. I’ve been able to remedy that pretty easily with earplugs, though.

3. Finances:
My budget is working out fine for me. So far I’ve averaged about $80-$100 a week, but I could have easily spent much less than that. I went to the markets and bought souvenirs for my family and friends, got Thai massages and bought various things for my apartment. If you really had to budget, I think you could easily spend only 3 dollars a day for food in total (90 baht), which comes out to about $90 a month. I’ve been more lenient with myself though because I saved up about $1,000 to spend on my entire 3 months. Taking care of laundry is easy as well- there are coin operated machines around, but I’ve found a little shop that I prefer to take my clothes to and it costs about a dollar per kilogram. They wash, dry and iron it for you- which I think is worth saving my time. I’m not sure I would do anything differently at all.?
4. Transportation:
I typically walk around town. In old town things are very close and I prefer to walk the streets to experience local life and atmosphere. Inside the moat is very touristy and not a good representation of traditional Thai life, but there are a lot of fun little shops, cafes, and markets to walk through. Old town is very small though, and I can easily walk from the North end to the South end in 20-30 minutes. Outside of old town I haven’t really had all that much time to travel around, but when I’ve gone it has been by tuktuk- a small motor taxi which is personalized and will take you to wherever you ask. They are more expensive than song tau’s- which are bigger red trucks that pick up several people and go a specific route. A tuktuk is about 100 baht, and a song tau is about 20-30 baht. Again, I don’t use them very often, and when I do it’s either on the weekend to get somewhere further away or at night time when I don’t feel like walking in the dark.  As I’ve said I’ve yet to explore the surrounding area in my time off. I’ve gone to the Elephant Nature Park a handful of times and stayed the night, as well as just done day visits when they need me to come back to the office. I’ve also been to the surrounding projects the foundation runs, and next week I am headed to the Cambodia project, followed by the Surin project.

I like to relax, so in the time I’m not at the park or in the office I’ve preferred to just slowly explore and walk through small streets, to the parks, and just taking it all in. I’ve gone to listen to live jazz a couple different times and to various musical gatherings with my thai friends, as well as to a yoga class and out to dinner with foreign travelers I’ve met and gotten a long with. At the end of my trip I plan on doing a meditation retreat on top of Doi Suthep, as well as taking a trip to Laos with a friend who is interning in Malaysia.

Questions #4
1. Professional:  How well did your coursework prepare you for your internship?  What knowledge of your field has been most important so far?
I would actually say my coursework hasn’t really prepared me for my internship very much at all. I think with this sort of work, life experience ends up coming in handy a lot more than coursework. I think having knowledge of world history, as well as my host country’s economy, culture and history has been really helpful in navigating every day situations, both at work and in my personal life. So in that sense, my International Development Internship Program class aided me, because it was primarily focused on research about my country. I have done some project impact evaluation, but the metrics here are much different than what I am used to back home. I often have to simplify everything to a very basic level when giving out feedback surveys, and then it feels like the content is washed out due to language barriers. I guess from my economics coursework, the most important thing that has helped me is knowing that you can always collect more information!

2. Cross Cultural:  Describe an event where you misunderstood something due to cultural differences.  What did you do?  What would you do next time?

Over the last two and a half months I would say misunderstandings have ruled my life. In truth it can be incredible exhausting and discouraging, from something basic like not being able to order actual vegetarian food at a restaurant to not understanding instructions given to you from your superiors. At first these situations really stressed me out, but after spending these last few weeks immersed in misunderstanding I’ve learned to take a breath and realize that even if I misunderstand, even if I make a mistake, most of the time it will not be a huge issue. I’ve had to learn to live with things changing at the drop of a hat. I could show up in the office and learn that I’m spending a week camping in the jungle and leaving that same day, or I could show up and find out that the trek I was planning to embark on was cancelled days ago and I somehow missed the memo. As one of my Thai friends said to me the other day “Sometime you take breath and say okay, something change but I take it.”

Personal:  What are the most important things you have learned about yourself thus far through this experience?
I’ve learned how to be very flexible, how to handle myself in uncomfortable situations and how to willfully change my outlook when I become discouraged. These are all things that will be very valuable to me in the future. I’ve also learned to alter my perspective in order to be more accepting of my environment, which has expanded my world view.

Questions #5
1. Professional:  Have you learned about any new possibilities for career paths?  Have you done any informational interviews (formal or informal) to learn about the field?

No I haven’t done any formal interviews, however I have met many people who work in various fields of development, and have made a handful of contacts. So I would say I definitely found out about new possibilities for career paths.

2. Cross Cultural:  What is the most frustrating aspect of your host culture?  What is the most rewarding aspect?

I would say the most frustration aspect of my host culture are the distinct differences in expectations between men and women. The image of women is very heavily focused on, and if you aren’t looking trendy and beautiful all the time, people may pick on you a bit. The most rewarding part of my host culture is I think the attempt to include everyone. People are often inviting me out to different events and gatherings, which is really nice.

3. Personal:  The period of cultural adjustment is often represented by a “W” curve with various peaks and valleys:  Honeymoon (peak); Initial Culture Shock (valley); Cultural Adjustment (peak); Further Culture Shock (valley); Further Adjustment (peak); Re-entry Shock (valley).  Outline your cultural adjustment thus far marking the highs and lows with approximate dates and descriptions of events that represent some of these phases (recognizing of course, that you are still in process).

Honeymoon- January 6th- February 1st
Cultural Shock- February 1st- February 21st
Cultural Adjustment - February 21st- March 1st
Further Cultural Shock March 1st- March 14th
Further Adjustment March 14th- March 24
Reentry March 24-now

Questions #6
1. What words of advice do you have for future interns as they prepare for this internship and living in your host country/culture?

Be ready to take care of yourself. Be on top of the ball when it comes to questions you may have, because if you don’t ask things may not get explained to you. Be ready to be flexible, and understand that things can change at a moment’s notice. Be ready to be frustrated, but also try to settle in that frustration and rise from it.

2. Professional:  Upon reflecting on your internship experience, are you more or less committed to a career in this field?  What experiences have contributed to this?

I am more committed to the field of development, but I’ve realized I really want to work with people- not as much with animals, even though I absolutely adore the elephants. The experiences involve going to Cambodia and Laos and seeing the impact development has on communities. I think even the projects the foundation runs in the end changes lives of people, and healthier communities are something I want to help cultivate.

3. Cross Cultural:  Looking back at your pre-departure journal or notes, how did your impressions of the host culture change?  What new sources of information shaped your perspectives?

I don’t think my perspective changed that much, except it’s a more in depth understanding as opposed to a surface understanding of norms and things that are expected. I think every culture has its upsides and downfalls, and I am now just more realistic and less idealistic. The sources of information pretty much come from interaction with hundreds of Thai people over the last few months.

4. Personal:  What has been the greatest challenge personally on this internship (reflect upon pre-departure all the way through your re-entry back home)?  What has been the greatest reward?

The greatest challenge I would say would be keeping myself centered amidst different cultural expectations of women. I had a really difficult time coming from a culture which holds women in such high regard to a culture in which women are supposed to be very respectful, and not step out of line. In some ways I felt silenced and not respected- I felt like a thing that should be looked at and admired, not a person who is capable of big feats. Women’s empowerment is a big and sensitive topic for me, especially in such a progressive town like Seattle where I live. So I struggled with that. I guess the greatest reward was figuring out that I can handle struggling with something as big as my identity, and coming out the other side stronger.