

Destination: The Unfamiliar

Thursday, July 5th 2007: “In exactly 48 hours, I will be on a red-eye flight from Detroit Michigan, to London, England. I’m not going to lie...I am terrified.” This was the first sentence in my travel journal that would become my only honest window into what I was feeling during that six week period, and it speaks the truth; I was absolutely terrified. I remember not being able to grasp the fact that I was really going to be across the world in two days. Now, this could have been because I had not even started to pack, or even glanced at my study abroad checklist that my mom had made me three copies of. However, I am convinced that it was because voluntarily going to Europe or anywhere other than my home state for that matter was completely unlike me.

My sudden decision to participate in study abroad came as a shock to everyone, but mostly my family. I was never the traveling type, and it pained me to be away from my family for even a short period of time. I guess you could say that I liked the familiar, and that traveling added a mysterious element to my life that I just wasn’t comfortable with. So, when I found myself making my way over to the study abroad fair in the fall of my junior year, one might see why I was a little confused with myself. The plan was to simply browse around, look at all of the pictures of the places I would never go to, possibly grab a free pen, and then head out. My plan was going great until I spotted the tables labeled “English” up against the wall. English has been my subject since I was able to read and write, and my integrated language arts focus for my Elementary Education major has given me the opportunity to take many English classes that have easily become my favorite courses that I have taken here at Michigan State. Of course, I was drawn in. Suddenly I found myself signing the contact list to receive emails about the program. I was so confused by my decision to consider actually studying abroad that I left the

Stephanie Jablonski
Topic Area: Personal Growth
Jablon28@msu.edu

fair as quickly as I could. That day I forgot to grab a free pen from the study abroad fair.

Instead, I opened the first door to what would be a life changing experience simply by writing down my name and my email address on a piece of paper.

Studying abroad was of course culturally enlightening, but from my personal experience I returned to the United States with a whole new sense of self, an enhanced passion for my subject of study, and a new wave of inspirations of how I wanted to use my experience to strengthen my development as a future teacher. First of all, I can't think of a better place to study English literature than England. London itself is so rich in culture, not to mention the fact that it is impossible to walk a block without seeing a bookstore. Most of the literature that one of my professors had us read was actually set in London. After being there for a while, I began to recognize street names and places that were mentioned throughout the texts. I have never felt so close to literature as I did in that class. I felt myself appreciating it more than I ever had before, and also looking back at past literature that I had read for other English classes and having a more positive reaction towards them. Writing a fantastic piece of literature as some of the ones I have read takes major inspiration and creative thought, and being in London seemed to give me a surge of that inspiration that was absolutely breathtaking.

Studying Shakespeare in England was also an experience unlike any other. Included in our program were nine plays, three of which were plays by Shakespeare. The first play that we saw which happened to be *Macbeth* was performed at the Swan Theater in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace. The combination of seeing where Shakespeare lived and then seeing the production of one of his most famous tragedies was both emotionally overwhelming and extremely exciting. It only got better when two weeks later we saw *Othello* at The Globe Theater, a modern day reconstruction of the original theater where William Shakespeare actually

Stephanie Jablonski
Topic Area: Personal Growth
Jablon28@msu.edu

acted and worked on some of his plays. It made him and his work seem more real and tangible to me, and I felt a new connection with it that one of my previous Shakespeare courses did not come close to creating.

In order to teach a subject and get students excited about it, especially English and literature, you have to really feel a connection like this along with passion and enthusiasm for the work itself. I have had English professors and teachers that have radiated with excitement about a certain book or passage in a text and that excitement definitely has a positive effect on the students' motivation to give that book a chance. Studying English Literature in London has seemed to strengthen the bond that I have had with literature all of these years, filling me with an eagerness to express my excitement to my future students and hopefully make them at least appreciate literature for everything it is, no matter what reading level they are at.

During the six week period that I was in London, I had more epiphanies than I thought I would have in my entire lifetime. Although I can remember each and every one in detail, there is one in particular that sticks out in my mind. It was a beautiful sunny day, which was a definite relief from all of the rainy days we had been having. My newly-founded study abroad friends and I decided to take advantage of the weather and take our books to a park near our dorm. We had been there for about two hours and I was completely focused on the biography of William Shakespeare that I was reading, but for some reason I decided to finally look up. I felt a chill throughout my body as I gazed at the site before me. The sky was a tranquil shade of blue and not a cloud could be seen. The water from the fountain was glistening in the sunlight as happy children ran through it giggling and screaming as the water hit their faces. Benches circled the fountain where people sat sipping from paper coffee cups; some seemed to be in the middle of conversation while others sat contently alone and turning the pages of their book in a complete

Stephanie Jablonski
Topic Area: Personal Growth
Jablon28@msu.edu

trance, seemingly mesmerized by the secret world that they were reading about. Others who were not on benches were surrounding me on the grass; some were sharing a bottle of wine while others took advantage of the warm rays of the sun which I assumed didn't often make an appearance in London.

It was at this moment that I took in a deep breathe and said to myself, "I am sitting in a park reading a book about William Shakespeare and sipping a vanilla latte in London." It was almost as if I had been in denial up until that moment in time. I remember smiling uncontrollably realizing that I had made the right decision to come here, and that without that decision and the sudden courageous drive that I had to study abroad, I might never have had this breathtaking moment which was one of many that I experienced during those six weeks.

By the time the last week rolled around, I was officially a different person. I was not only more culturally aware, but I felt accomplished and rejuvenated. Studying abroad gave me the opportunity to live in a completely different country for six weeks. It was almost as if I had started another life there, because by the time I left I felt like I was apart of that city. I had a more positive outlook on life, and while this may sound almost extreme, it is entirely true. I made some amazing friends, I got to see sites and go to places that I thought I would only see in movies, I got to spend some time on my own getting to know myself away from my family and my friends at home, and I rediscovered and enhanced my love for books and the power of words. I was ready to take more chances and step out of my familiar walls into a new world of opportunity and adventure. There are not going to be many opportunities for most of us, especially me, to actually live in a country for six weeks, or even a whole semester as some do. Studying abroad allows students to have that chance, and taking advantage of it will change your life in some way guaranteed. It definitely changed mine in more ways than I could ever imagine.