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Sharing his zest for Britain

Even after taking seven January Term classes to England, Ken Ericksen hasn't lost his zest for all things British nor his joy in sharing that passion with Linfield students.

Ericksen, professor of English, beams with excitement when discussing January Term and his most recent course, Samuel Johnson and 18th Century London. He's been taking classes to England periodically since 1989, and remains stimulated and excited by the experience.

"January Term is experiential learning at its best," said Ericksen, who has taught at Linfield since 1965 and who specializes in 18th century British literature, Shakespeare and drama. "The travel courses get the students emotionally involved with the subject matter, because they are actually able to go to the places where Samuel Johnson lived. You can see movies but that's not the same thing as actually going into the house where he lived, seeing the table he wrote at or sitting in the chair he sat in."

One of the big differences between a January Term travel course and a regular academic class is the different degree in depth of reading that is possible, Ericksen noted.

"You can't possibly require them to do the amount of reading you can in a course here on campus," he said. "And you can't require them to do research in the same way."

But the experiential riches of field trips clearly make up for any paucity of reading. The students spend mornings in class reading and discussing Johnson's essays and poetry, as well as working on their travel journal. Johnson is brought to life in afternoon field trips to his home, neighborhood and church, plus cathedrals and museums throughout London and in Stratford and Litchfield.

"The field trips are just as important as reading material for class because they immerse the students into Johnson's world and broaden their perspectives," Ericksen said.

But he also requires essays written during the course of their travels. For example, during a visit to the 18th century floor in the National Portrait Gallery, students must select one of the portraits and write an essay examining their feelings and responses to the painting.

"This is a much different type of research than they are capable of doing in McMinnville," Ericksen said. "The students become more cosmopolitan, not just geographically, but also in time, because they are learning



Ken Ericksen, bottom, right, with his 2004 January Term class at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, the oldest pub in London, where Samuel Johnson held meetings of "the Club." The pub is located about a block from Johnson's house.

about the 18th century. That is one of the most important parts of studying literature, to discover the ways in which we are similar and different from our ancestors."

Although English is the native tongue of both England and the United States, the language can vary as much as the culture and the customs. Many of the students who take Ericksen's class are traveling abroad for the first time and are transformed before his eyes, growing in confidence and their ability to explore new places.

"The ability to go into a strange environment and realize they can survive there is an important part of their education," he added. "This is a good trip for students who haven't traveled before. It's a very safe place to get your feet wet in foreign travel because you have your professor with you, looking out for you."

It's not unusual for one or two students to become so enamored of England that they decide to apply to the semester abroad program.

"A semester is so much more intensive and personal," Ericksen said. "It's a confidence builder because they are basically on their own."

Yet for Ericksen, January Term blends the best of both worlds as it whets the students' appetites. He gets to share a city he loves, and he gets to know the students as they get to know him on a much different level.

"It's exciting walking around London because I constantly see things I recognize from literature," he said. "I feel as much at home in London as anywhere. For me, it's the best of all possible worlds because I can be on my own to satisfy my contemplative needs or with the students satisfying my social needs. And it's fun being with them."

— Mardi Mileham