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Sharing His Zest for Britain

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Students in the stairwell of the Melk Monastery in Melk, Austria.

Richardson agrees that the service approach provides an opportunity for students to see the practical application of their language skills. “Too often language is taught in a vacuum,” he said. “What we all want to do is make the world a classroom and the walls disappear. And it needs to be a credible transition from what goes on in class to what goes on when students are involved in using their language out in the world where it’s spoken naturally.”

Issmael cited January Term courses in Mexico and Ghana, where students interact with local residents. Vivian Tong, professor of nursing, is developing a course for India next January, which could be a preamble to a study abroad program for students who return from a semester or year abroad. They have a much harder time re-entering this culture than entering the culture they studied or lived in, Richardson said.

“They see their country in a different way. They are more engaged in the debate about important political and social issues. The questions they ask themselves are fundamentally different from the ones that were important to them before,” Richardson said.

“They have added a layer of understanding and insight into the people they are becoming,” he added. “They have grown into their adult selves in a fundamentally different way from what would have happened if they had stayed here. All of a sudden issues that were not important to them before are terribly important now.”

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

“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,” Erickson 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,” Erickson said. “The students become more cosmopolitan, not just geographically, but also in time, because they are learning 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 Erickson’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;” Erickson said. “It’s a confidence builder because they are basically on their own.”

Yet for Erickson, January Term blends the best of both worlds as it when 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 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