

Letter from America Spring 2012

Goucher College is the only higher education institution in the US to require study abroad, and as such, is something of a study-abroad hub. Study-abroad switcharoos are perhaps inevitable – like in *Freaky Friday*, that old Jody Foster movie in which the blond daughter and the blond mother trade bodies. Two students who recently traded lives, Jasper and Sonny, are decidedly *not* old enough to remember that film.

Jasper, a Goucher College student, spent all of last year studying at the University of East Anglia. Sonny, a University of East Anglia student, is now studying at Goucher College (in Baltimore, Maryland). Both are in their early twenties and have dark blond hair. Both give lively and insightful feedback during our weekly fiction writing workshops. Both are affable, impossible not to like. But there are also notable (sometimes worrying) differences.

Here in the US, we tend to give students a lot of small assignments, punctuated by occasional big assignments, and a significant final project or exam. Typically, in creative writing, small assignments aren't marked for quality, but completing them (or not) affects the participation grade and/or the final portfolio grade.

Jasper, the American, excels and thrives within this framework. Once, when Jasper was a first-year, he asked me about a particular fiction writing technique. I mentioned a Flannery O'Connor story in my explanation. Before our next session, Jasper had not only completed our normal assignments, but had also read the O'Connor story in the library. He was excited to talk to me about it. The stories and how-to essays I'd forced the class to read (by collecting and assessing written responses) had ignited his curiosity. It's just one small illustration of how American Jasper has prospered in the more-structured American classroom. We, the faculty, can add, change, or delete assessed assignments throughout the semester, depending on the needs of the group. No course document ever goes to a committee for approval. This freedom and the hands-on nature of American education were partly what lured me back to the US after five years.

Within the American system, Sonny, the British student, struggles to complete the quantity of tasks that are required for the module. He is frequently late or absent, mainly, it seems, because he doesn't have his materials ready. He's the third UEA student I've taught at Goucher and the third to struggle in exactly the same way. All of them regularly expressed their absolute love of the module and subject. I believed them – the writing showed great promise in each case. Nevertheless, the students didn't complete the work or missed the deadlines, and thus, despite their enthusiasm, often found it difficult to engage in class activities or to build comprehension at the same rate as their classmates.

Is it because the semesters are roughly four weeks longer here? Is it because there is more expected of the student on a weekly basis (rather than a focus on assignments that come at the end of the semester)? Or am I imposing my own theories on something that is simply a coincidence? Maybe the educational systems aren't the issue at all. I decide to

get the two students together to ask about their experiences. I want to avoid pushing any particular agenda or idea during our conversation. But it turns out I don't have to worry about getting them to talk.

Jasper and Sonny fall into easy conversation before I even introduce them. The subject? East Anglia, of course. They talk about the university life there with misty-eyed affection, reminiscing about favorite haunts. Jasper tries to recall the name of a particular night club.

"Elements?" says Sonny. "It's on Prince of Wales."

They both have the "Ah, Prince of Wales" look – a look that suggests they are transported back to a place they miss like a good friend. They focus on their social lives, and it seems, at first, that they are less affected by the *study* part of *study abroad* than by the *abroad* part. It makes sense. After all they have traded *lives*, not just academic pursuits.

Jasper recalls integrating quickly into the UEA world, living in a residence hall with mostly British students. "Almost all of my friends were British people. It felt more like I was abroad." The down side was that his friends were first years, a couple years younger than he was as a third year (in the US, university lasts for four years). But he enjoyed being swept up in their world, being "one of the gang." Sometimes that meant he had to endure the tensions between the uni students and the locals, especially when he'd go out with friends during breaks.

He tried to get involved with like-minded students his own age by attending a gathering of the creative writing society, which met outside of class. "I really had the worst time," he says. Initially, the activities reminded him of things he'd done at the creative writing club at Goucher. Students freewrote and then shared. But that was where the similarities ended. "They seem to have written 'in-jokes' for comedic effect. They were trying to shock and amuse each other."

"So it was more like a friend club," says Sonny.

"Exactly!" says Jasper.

"Societies are like that," says Sonny. "People like to get money to get drunk."

"A society is a way of life over there," says Jasper. "They were closest of friends and hung out everyday. Not like the clubs at Goucher. You're committed to it."

"It's a lifestyle. A way of life," says Sonny. "I miss going out sometimes. Here people sit around in their rooms. I miss pubs more than anything. Bars are so much different." I'm interested in Sonny's comments. In the UK, I wasn't happy in my job, partly because I was uncomfortable with the philosophies underpinning education and the practices that grew out of that. However, I loved my life outside of work. It was easy to walk to

restaurants, movies, and so forth, which may sound trivial, but really isn't. I didn't own a car, something unthinkable in most of the US. I was able to take my dog to pubs and bookstores, on trains, and in taxis. I've finally landed in a cool Baltimore neighborhood that I like as much as Lancaster. But it's certainly anomalous in the US to find the quality of life British people might take for granted.

After a pause, Sonny says, "On the other hand, people here are more friendly. Strangers are friendly. You see it in seminars that British people are more reserved. Americans are more up for discussion."

Finally, Sonny segues into the differences between the US and UK academic systems. Before he left the UK, friends had told him about having smaller assignments more often. They warned him that the US universities were not as good academically, not as demanding as U.E.A. I cringe inside, but try not to show it. When I was in the UK, there was a big stink when students wanted me to supervise their PhD's. Seemingly, I wasn't qualified. The director of graduate studies said to me, "American degrees aren't worth the paper they're printed on." It was an attitude I encountered a lot. My instinct was that it was wrong. But how can one go about proving such a thing? What would Sonny say about it?

Sonny smiles as he thinks about the warnings from his fellow students. He shakes his head. "I think it's just as good. You're constantly doing little assignments, building you constructively. It's hard. Time management was crazy at first."

"It's so interesting to hear you say that," says Jasper. He slaps his hands down on his legs, like he's been waiting to hear these words a long time. "When I was over there [at UEA], I felt like I had so many eggs in so few baskets. There would be one or two papers and a final. You could probably not do any work all semester and not get found out. I wasn't prepared for that." He smiles, looks at Sonny, who nods.

"I can imagine," Sonny says.

"I just needed to be casually studying. Not focused on education in the same way," says Jasper. "Sometimes I worked on assignments too early and second guessed myself. The whole thing was so shocking to me. I'm not sure even now how I would adjust to that." I ask him if he found a way to handle it. "Eventually," he says, "I just bought a bike and explored the town."

I sympathize with what Jasper and Sonny say about the adjustment. When I first went to the UK, the module outlines for my classes included only one assessment item, which was the final portfolio. I wanted to change the outlines such that students would submit drafts periodically throughout the semester. These wouldn't be given marks for quality. Students would simply receive a small number of points for completing them thoroughly (or lose those points if they didn't). I wasn't accustomed to needing anyone's approval to make such changes. So I was taken aback by the process – all of the consultation required with the department, the uni, the external – and also by the bewilderment and concern the

changes seemed to elicit. I teach writing by structuring a module that models the process of writing. I'm constantly coming up with new ideas for doing it – and that creativity is a huge part of what I like about teaching. In the UK, I couldn't hold the students accountable for much in terms of assessment, and it affected their engagement. The module outline felt like a strait jacket instead of an outline – a sketch to be filled in.

“I prefer it the way you guys have it here,” says Sonny. “You'd have to have a special relationship with the tutor at UEA to get this kind of attention. You're your own boss. Here, you're constantly in contact with the tutors. They want to know what's going on.”

“You also can't have a minor involvement in the same way over there,” says Jasper. “I like to take music classes, even though I'm not studying music. I signed up for a music course at UEA, thinking I could continue that practice. But it turned out that *The Art of Giving a Performance* was for music majors who would be on stage. I had to drop and change my whole schedule.”

“I agree,” says Sonny. I nod. So do I. Here in the US, a student has far more latitude to be wrong about what he or she wants to do in life. I always thought eighteen was too young for people to know that. Here, they can dabble while they decide on majors, and they can continue to do so as they complete those majors.

There is a pause as the two of them digest their agreement – both seem surprised that their experiences aren't anomalous. “But what I would say,” says Jasper, “is that I miss some of the lectures over there. They were awesome.”

“Yes!” says Sonny.

“There were different faculty members week to week. Really enlightening. A lot of work went into them. I do like our American system that relies on discussion, but there's something to be said for a good lecture. It helps to hear from someone who knows what they're talking about.”

I like what Jasper says here. I'm reminded of my literature colleagues' fabulous lectures. I learned a great deal from them myself. In general, faculty collaboration happens less here than in the UK – I miss that.

It seems like these *But then again* and *On the other hand* observations could go on all night. When Sonny contemplates the end of his time abroad, he looks melancholy. “I'll miss being loved so much. They do like accents over here!” Both Sonny and Jasper laugh.

Like in the movie, in which the mother and daughter work through their fundamental misconceptions of one another before they're restored to their original lives, these two students already show signs that they understand each other's struggles. In some ways, the study abroad program seems to be doing what it says on the tin – fostering empathy, arguably the most crucial quality a writer can have, and widening perceptions. But

sometimes “character-building experience” can be code for *unpleasant*. Perhaps students would benefit from more preparation before they leave home, more information about what to expect and what will be expected. Maybe it would make for less *Freaky* in the *Friday*.

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