

Amelia Poling

CM331: Writing for Communication

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Profile

Walking down the aisle to his window seat on a plane headed for London-Heathrow, Doug Poling reminisced about the life he was leaving behind. At 12 years old, he wasn't ready to move to another country. He thought about the friends he would miss and the house he called home: a home that he may never see again. He didn't know much about the U.K., but he tried to stay positive, because, as his parents kept telling him, "Sometimes change can be good."

In their new home, Doug immediately noticed drastic differences from his old life. Not only did the nights begin at 3 p.m., but he faced a massive culture shock. The Brits were far from welcoming and he wasn't used to this new lifestyle. Everything about Doug's new home seemed different. "Having been used to living in a Detroit suburb, it felt like I was walking through history when walking down the streets of London." He compared the old historical buildings and independent shops to the modern buildings and huge retail chains in Michigan. Specifically, during his first few months in London, he visited a small chocolate shop in Knightsbridge. The atmosphere was something he had never encountered before. It felt like he was living hundreds of years in the past while munching on the handmade chocolate.

Doug's father's work put their family on a plane and sent them to a different country. The move dramatically impacted Doug's life, as it would for most children, but he gained perspective about American attitudes. Interacting primarily with Brits for over five years, the little things that

foreigners find so annoying about Americans began to stand out. He began to lose his sense of pride in being an American, while at the same time never becoming fully British.

Doug's family had the opportunity to travel across Europe and interact with many different types of people, because they lived in England. He visited Moscow during the peak of the Cold War, and upon their entry into the Soviet Union, Doug's family noticed that they were being followed because they were Americans which automatically put them under suspicion. This unique experience heavily influenced his broader world perspective. His family often visited art museums throughout Europe. Doug was able to fully immerse himself in art from different cultures and he attributes his love of art to his time in Europe to this day.

Doug's travels afforded him the opportunity to learn about different cultures and the opinions that people from varying countries have about Americans. To his dismay, he received more negative feedback than positive. Throughout his time in London, the second he opened his mouth and Brits heard his semi-American accent, they automatically associated him with the negative beliefs many Europeans have about Americans. Without his time in London, Doug would never have been able to learn how strong these opinions truly are.

“Any American who lives abroad develops a different sense of the United States,” said Doug. “I think it's very constructive to see how the United States and American citizens are perceived outside the country. I think that America is generally very insular. Their conception of the world is viewed exclusively from the lens of America. It is constructive for Americans to be exposed to different viewpoints and conceptions of the world from the view of these other countries.”

Slowly, Doug began to lose his American identity. Though he was technically American, he would watch loud, obnoxious American tourists running around his city and feel distant from them. Despite his partial American identity, he did not associate himself with these people. His accent slowly shifted and, although never British, he was told that he had a “funny accent” upon returning to the states. And though he never truly immersed himself in British activities, such as soccer, he did enjoy them. “I wasn’t American, but there were aspects of England that I would never be part of,” said Doug.

After five and a half years in London, Doug moved back to the U.S. to attend Tufts University. Neither truly American nor English, Doug struggled. “I didn’t initially make a lot of friends. I wasn’t totally in sync with a lot of my classmates,” who were interested in going to bars and parties. Having been going to pubs since the age of 14, Doug was already done with that part of his life. Once at Tufts, he recognized how much he had evolved. He found himself preferring the library to frat row.

Doug looks back at the move to England with fondness. “In hindsight, it was the best thing that could’ve happened to me,” he said about the move to London. He even thinks that it would be valuable for all Americans to spend time living abroad if they can so that they could gain a similar expanded perspective on the world. “I gained an elevated understanding of others and a greatly broadened sense of the world,” said Doug.