Q&A: Dr. Jonathan Peters on his inaugural study-abroad program, takeaways and more

Interview conducted by: Sherry Liang

With prestigious bylines and accolades to his name, Dr. Jonathan Peters added one more accomplishment in tow this summer: teaching in Prague.

In a bedroom-turned-classroom on the fifth floor of the Courtyard by Marriott Prague City hotel, we found our home for three-and-a-half weeks. Stationed at the front of the classroom alongside his “Bob Ross Easel,” Dr. Peters led us through the ins and outs of travel writing, culminating in an in-depth story and an appreciation for meat stews.

On the last day of our program, I sat down with Dr. Peters to reflect on his inaugural study abroad program — speaking about expectations, realizations and everything in between.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

**SL:** What was the selling factor for Prague when you first decided to come?

**JP:** A couple of things — one, how little I knew of it. I have never been to the Czech Republic. I thought, this is an opportunity for me to learn more about a country, city and whole region of Europe that I know little about.

Then, talking with other UGA instructors who had led study abroad programs here like Dodie [Cantrell] and Ann Hollifield, each of them said, “Oh my gosh, you have to go to Prague.” So I said, “Okay, I'll jump off the cliff. And we'll just see.” Yeah, I feel like I landed on my feet.

**SL:** Did you study abroad as a student?

**JP:** No, never. In fact, that was one of my biggest regrets as a college student. And when I decided to do this as a professor, I told a couple of people, “I will finally get to study abroad, just 15 years too late.” I didn’t really think much about it at the time, and it was only years later when I began to travel more myself and have cool experiences in different countries around the world that I came to realize how much I regretted not studying abroad. Then I become a professor and end up at Georgia where we’ve got a large number of study abroad opportunities. I feel like I finally closed the circuit. Not having done it all those years ago.

**SL:** What about the trip surprised you the most?

**JP:** It’s a lot of work to organize a study abroad program that’s successful and dynamic, and by dynamic I mean full of local and other excursions that are educational and fun. I feel like this summer we batted 1,000 on that. Then there are the cultural adjustments of living in a foreign country for about a month. Even though I’ve been to Europe a number of times, I think I went through some of the same types of adjustments that many of the students did.

Probably the biggest concern that I had day to day was just making sure that everybody was safe, and that everybody was having a productive time. Some of that can be a little bit stressful, but for the most part, the thing that was occupying a lot of my resources every day was making sure that everybody is safe and happy.
SL: What’s the transition like — from teaching in a lecture hall to teaching in a hotel bedroom in front of your Bob Ross easel?

JP: I shouldn’t complain, because at least one of the other study abroad programs didn’t even have a classroom, and so even though I can now say I have taught in a bedroom for a full academic program, it is different. I mean, the biggest difference for me is the lack of AV equipment and not being able to use audio, video, PowerPoints and I did not realize how much I used those things until I didn’t have them. Otherwise, yeah, the classroom’s weird — teaching in a bedroom is kind of spiritually strange. But given the space that we had, and the budget that we were working under, I thought, “This will work, we will make this work.”

SL: The class of 18 students is probably different than the larger lectures you’re used to teaching. What was the difference in interacting with a smaller group of students?

JP: I’m used to teaching classes that are 130 people. In that, no matter how hard you try … the large majority of them you don’t get to know personally. One of the real treasures of teaching is getting to know the students as people. The line that I have used with a lot of classes and students is that students are people first and students second. Along the way [in Prague], a lot of students have said, “Well, I’ve got this thing that I want to ask you about that’s unrelated to travel writing” — trying to get a job, get an internship, how do I do an interview or how do I negotiate for a job. To the extent that I can help in things like that, that’s a ton of fun. It’s been working with all of you more closely, hanging out with you outside of the building.

SL: With this as your first study abroad program, what was the process in formulating the curriculum and the assignments?

JP: I modified [an old syllabus] with the two study abroad syllabi that Ann [Hollifield] and Dodie [Cantrell] had shared with me, and I was trying to create a hybrid, combining their experience here with my ideas of teaching and writing. I wanted to create enough space in the syllabus that you all would have enough time to go off and independently explore. I don’t know that there’s a cosmically right or wrong way to structure a study abroad class, but with those two interests in mind, you’re taking the academic side seriously, and on the other hand, [I am] giving you the independence that I think anyone needs. So I wanted to create that space where we could do good hard work, and then you all could go out and make your way in Prague, in the Czech Republic and beyond.

SL: Throughout the three-and-a-half weeks in Prague, you’ve seen what works and what doesn’t. What are some of the things you’d keep the same and some that you’d change?

JP: The excursions and activities I got to do — all the same, they were great. The people we did them with I thought were terrific hosts and good guides, and they were safe. The class portion itself, I’ve tweaked some things, and I underestimated how difficult it would be to teach writing in three-and-a-half weeks. Fortunately for me, I’ve never been the type to marry myself to a syllabus. So that is where I would make my revisions, I would revisit the assignments that we did. The other reason that I think I had to do that this summer — about a third of [the students] were not journalism students. They are advertising, PR, film or something else like political science. That meant that we weren’t moving as quickly through things as I had initially thought, all of which was totally fine because I wanted to move at a pace that was right for the class.
SL: What do you hope for the students to gain from their experience here?

JP: I would hope that this study abroad experience shows [the students] how little they know about the world around them, how little of that world they have seen and how many assumptions that they have made about other people and their way of life. What comes with those assumptions, often is judgment. And that conceptualization of other ways of life is habitual and quite normal for anybody to engage in. But I think that travel helps to strip away some of those barriers, and you get to see the more we have in common with people who are unfamiliar to us in unfamiliar places. And in making human connections with locals, some of these distinctions, these socially constructed distinctions that we made between us and the other – they begin to fall away. Whether it’s big system-wide issues, or smaller inner-personal issues, it forces you to think about you a lot. And you can begin to see the way that you have ordered your life around you, for better or worse.

SL: Turning the tables on our final assignment back to you, what has been your most memorable experience in Prague?

JP: This may sound either like a cop out or cliché, I don’t know, but I think the most memorable thing would be in the aggregate, seeing how well all of the students adjusted to the challenge of living in a foreign country, to see the friend groups develop as naturally and cohesively as they did. The other thing is that the reason that anyone teaches — it’s not money. When I think of the reason that I got into teaching, it’s to see those light bulb moments. Part of this, and this may be the selfish part of it, is that it reminds me of my first trip to Europe, and how enthralled I was. It was kind of transportive to get to see that in students, and it made me happy that it was meaningful for the students. So I would say that, as much of a cop out as it may be, it is that aggregate experience — it is being able to be part of something that meant a lot to most of the people in the room.

Quickfire questions:

SL: Prague in one word?
JP: Storied

SL: Favorite restaurant?
JP: Mincovna

SL: Favorite Czech dish?
JP: Either beef in cream sauce or goulash

SL: The meal eaten most often?
JP: Beef in various forms and root vegetables

SL: Favorite part of the trip?
JP: The students

SL: Best purchase here?
JP: I think I bought one thing on this entire trip, and I didn’t buy it here—I bought it in Denmark. I bought a candle for my mother.
SL: Well, I guess that also answers my next question of what your worst purchase was.
JP: There it is.

SL: Favorite city from your Europe trip this summer?
JP: Prague

SL: For formalities’ sake, who’s been your favorite study abroad class so far? (Our class.)
JP: Compared with all of the others I’ve been with ...

Sherry Liang is a second-year entertainment media studies and international affairs major at the University of Georgia. She attended Travel Writing in Prague during the Maymester 2019 term.