

My Journey Overseas to Braunschweig, Germany.

The Truth?

I never planned for it to happen.

...but thanks
to my friends,

It did.

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My Reflection

It has been 9 months now since I have returned from my exchange to Germany. Throughout the course of my one year experience in a foreign land, I began to slowly grow an appreciation for what this experience would mean to me in the end. Nevertheless, one thing I did not anticipate is the personal growth and benefit I continue to experience even until this very day. I can truthfully say that this experience will forever be apart of who I am, as the impact it has had on me is far from being quantifiable. It has not only added another story to my life, but also shaped me on a much deeper level; it has led me to a fuller understanding of the world around me, which I feel has resulted in a clearer understanding of myself.

Here, I will to share my story. I will talk about my thoughts, expectations, and experiences of this journey and how they are contributing to my personal growth. Answers to questions such as “What does an exchange have to offer?” or “What is it like to study abroad?” provide students with a starting point in obtaining a feel for the experience, however that is only the tip of the iceberg. I feel that in many cases, knowing all the benefits of this opportunity is simply not sufficient to build up the motivation and dedication a full time engineering student needs in order to see this plan through. Through my story, I wish to emphasis on the value and worth of this experience, in hopes to more closely capture and convey its essence. I want to connect the general benefits of going on exchange (such as traveling, meeting people of different backgrounds, or being exposed to a different culture) to direct, significant personal impacts. My hope is that some of our thoughts and feelings will coincide, so that you will find a correlation between my story and yours. I also hope that this will inspire you to consider this path; a path that led me to some personal discoveries I still feel would otherwise never have happened.

How It All Began

Ever since I was a child, I wanted to travel. The reason for that was simply because I wanted to see new things and go places I have never been before. The sources for that were merely curiosity and the sense of excitement. However as I grew up, the reason for my desire to traveling began to evolve into a more personal one – to obtain a validation of the world I am in. As I took more history and geography courses, I felt more and more distant from the rest of the world. The more I learned, the more questions I had about what was real. Regardless of how many pictures, maps, videos or documentaries I saw, textbooks I read, or stories I heard, I felt that there was something missing. My problem was that I absorbed historical events as I would fictional stories – they fascinated me but I would quickly forget about them. My knowledge of Geography would last only until the extent of the exam period, and then it would vanish. I knew that my belief of everything I learned would not be confirmed until I somehow made the knowledge a part of me. This is not to say that I doubted the existence of the world, but I needed to bridge the gap between me and what I have learned in order to establish a true respect and understanding of the rest of the world.

With that said however, traveling has always seemed to be a distant and impracticable goal for me. No matter how hard I planned, it seemed unfeasible to incorporate my desire to travel into any of my short-term plans. Entering university directly after my high school graduation was a path my family had paved for me and assumed to take. At the same time, I was socialized to believe that taking this path would increase my ability to build a more successful future for myself. Hence, any deviation from this path was out of the question. My financial situation and prospect also suppressed the idea of making any travel arrangements in the near future. Under such circumstances, my wish to travel would have to be postponed, although I could not anticipate how long the postponement would last.

In September 2001, I entered UW with such a mentality and was ready to make Waterloo my home for the next five years. Even when a few of my classmates brought up the idea of exchange in first year, I did not pay much attention to the idea because I saw it as an interruption to my plans. The idea was intriguing, but since it was not a part of what I had envisioned, it was a goal that would be too farfetched. Regardless, even if I was interested, I had no idea of where I would start in pursuing this idea. I was only in first year and considering such a possibility would only add to my boundless list of uncertainties. The thought of staying with my class for the next five years did not sound as exciting, but it was the simpler and more reassuring option.

Luckily, the talks on this subject never died down around me. I soon heard that an exchange to Germany would cost me next to nothing in terms of tuition, and that my expenses would almost be the same as if I were to stay in UW. Needless to say, this piece of information recaptured my attention – at least my financial worries were diminished. Although money is one of the biggest and very realistic worries of most students, I am now in awe to think that it could have prevented me from gaining such a precious and fulfilling life experience. I was willing to give up this experience to risk the chance of being in debt after graduation. My mistake was that I viewed the exchange experience as only a present investment and could not foresee how it would practically benefit my future. Hence, I am certainly very glad that I was fortunate to have met such a group of friends, whom I still attribute the happening of my exchange experience to.

I can still remember the day that started it all. It was a winter day back in 2002 near the end of my 1B term. Two of my friends and I were enjoying lunch at Brubaker's after one of our exams when of course, we began talking about the idea of exchange once again. Yet on this particular day, this conversation would end very differently. Although I was still clueless about what this whole adventure would mean, the countless talks and support from friends have made the idea a more comfortable and acceptable one. I was still uncertain about how realistic the idea was, but I was able to put that aside and willing to proceed with the idea one step at a time. It seemed that all of our previous talks on this subject were leading up to this very day, because this was the day the three of us made a pact that by our third year at UW, we would be in Germany.

My Pre-departure and Expectations

September 1, 2004 was the day that signaled the beginning of my one year journey. Although I had been taking German courses since 1B, the reality of what I was about to do did not fully register until about a month before my departure. Thus I was so overwhelmed with mixed feelings and thoughts that there was almost no room left for expectations. During my last month at home, I found myself paying more attention to the details of my life. I cherished the city and the moments with family and friends more than I ever had before. Within the last week, I felt like I was constantly in a race with time to vividly capture the scent, feel, and taste of everything around me, as if I was afraid that I would eventually forget. As mentioned before, my knowledge about the rest of the world was limited. Hence, I left home with an open mind and not too much expectations of what I was about to experience. All I knew was that I wanted to do lots of traveling and wanted to see as much of Europe as time and money permitted.

The First 6 Months

In retrospect, I was fairly ambitious about traveling since day one, and perhaps because of that, my craze for traveling gradually tamed down over the course of the year. However, this is not to say that the value and meaning of my trips slowly faded as well. In fact, it was during the last 6 months when I encountered the more meaningful and rewarding experiences that lead to my self-revelation. To pave the foundation for comparison between the first half and second half of my exchange experience, I will begin by describing my thoughts and experiences during the first 6 months.

These were the most hectic and busiest months during my exchange. Just as I suspected, I traveled an enormous amount. By the end of my first month there, I had already seen more of Germany than many of the Germans. I was completely energized and my hunger for traveling continued to grow. By the second and third month, I was already anxious to travel to other countries like the Netherlands and Austria. There were many days and nights of trip planning leading up to each excursion to ensure that my experience would be as rewarding as possible. I wanted to find the cheapest yet nice hostels; I wanted to cover as much grounds and as many sights as I possibly can; I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity and get the most out of my stay at each destination.

Needless to say, I was able to achieve all of that because I was simply filled with energy, excitement, and anticipation. In retrospect, the best analogy to sum up my feelings at the time would probably be the Little Mermaid. Perhaps not to the same extent, however, I certainly shared the same feelings of curiosity, sense of vulnerability and intense desire to be exposed to “another” world. Toronto is my home, and I always thought I would be able to obtain everything I needed there. Yet I began to question myself, how will I know for sure unless I look beyond “my world” to learn about the rest of it? Going on exchange lead me to this discovery. It also expanded my perception of “my world” to encompass a larger scope, one that better represents the real world. As of now, there are still parts of the world I cannot even begin to relate to. However, whenever I think about my options

and plans for my future, I now notice that my considerations have greatly broadened; I am not as intimidated by geography, and hence limiting myself to “home”.

Seeing more of the world also lead me to appreciate Canada more. There seems to be a general conception that Canadians cannot be truly described since we are a makeup of people with different backgrounds. However, not long after my arrival in Germany was when I recognized what it means to be Canadian. I quickly developed a stronger sense of attachment to Canada. I was suddenly able to see the similarities between everyone that I knew back home, and was able to relate these similarities back to the Canadian culture. Although our backgrounds may be different, I found commonality in our lifestyle and way of thinking - which leads to my next realization.

Growing up in Canada nurtured me with an understanding and acceptance of people of different race, cultures, and religion, and I have always thought that that was enough. I felt fortunate to have grown up in such a multicultural city. Since Toronto consisted of people from all around the world, it was almost an easy way for me to get to know the world without requiring me to physically go to different countries. I continued to believe this, until my trip to Europe. The fact is that people with German, French, or Italian background in Canada are all extremely different from the Germans in Germany, the French in France, and the Italians in Italy. This may seem like an obvious, hence unnecessary point to emphasize, but for me, it was not until I left my home, my comfort zone, that I appreciated the implications of this obvious fact. Due to the vast differences that I observed, I concluded that it was no longer sufficient for me to learn about the world and myself through the eyes of Canada. I must merge myself into the lives of others and see things through their eyes in order to obtain a more accurate perception of the world. I felt extremely lucky when I realized how my exchange experience had guided me to this opportunity.

Upon the return from each and every trip I made, I felt growth in some aspect. I expected that I would make lots of observations as I traveled, but the impacts of my observations were not apparent until I began traveling. This resulted in the building of a new reservoir of knowledge, one that never would have been created if it were not for such an accumulation of personal experiences. This pattern of growth was also apparent throughout the group of Canadian exchange students. Our conversations went from centering on our personal adaptation and excitement, to comparisons between the educational, environmental, health, and social issues of different countries. As we traveled more, we were less overwhelmed with the differences in architecture, scenery, fashion or cuisine we observed; by the end of the sixth month, we have more or less adapted to the European lifestyle at last. This was when I began to see traveling under a different light.

The Last 6 Months

My experience during the last 6 months was quite different from that of the first 6 months. As mentioned earlier, by this time the novelty of being in another part of the world had faded. I was more comfortable with my new lifestyle and found my place in a

new environment. Although there were times when I still felt foreign, I had overall gained a stronger sense of belonging. Naturally, I was able to relate to and see the impact of new experiences more quickly and directly. Going beyond seeing merely the face value of my experiences really contributed greatly to my self-revelation. Two major events that immediately comes to mind: my interview with P&G and my trip to Christiania, Copenhagen.

After just 6 months, I already started picturing how the end of my exchange experience would look. The mere thought of that made me apprehensive; I was almost afraid of the idea of returning home. I felt that I had changed and was unsure how readily I would be able to find my place in the Canadian culture. I was really surprised about how quickly I had adapted to the life in Germany, as much so that I began viewing Toronto as a new environment where I would have to readapt. Also, I recognized how much I had gained in just 6 months, and I wanted more. Hence, I started researching the idea of obtaining a job in Germany for my next co-op term. Not only would this be a good chance for me to further develop my knowledge and skills, but also, this would delay my departure for another 4 months. Shortly after my application, I received a reply and was scheduled for an interview with P&G.

As much as I was excited about the opportunity, I was also extremely nervous. This interview would be closer to a real job interview than any other interviews I have had. It was scheduled for the entire day and consisted of separate interviews with three different managers of the company. Unfortunately, I did not end up getting the job. I was disappointed. Nevertheless, I knew I had given it my best so I did not have any regrets. I accepted the fact that I would soon be returning home and began to prepare myself for that day. Little did I know, this interview experience represented more than just a career opportunity or a chance to experience more of Germany. It sparked the start to a self-revelation that would take place on my trip to Copenhagen, just 2 weeks after my interview.

The trip to Copenhagen had been planned weeks before the date of departure. I became fairly close friends with an exchange student from Denmark and this trip to Copenhagen would serve as a chance to visit him, as well as see the city. One of the most popular attractions is Christiania, a partially self-governed neighbourhood which has established semi-legal status as an independent community. This unique community focuses on living a simple, communal life, a concept very different from that of today's society. The citizens follows their own set of laws, which includes no cars, stealing, guns, bulletproof vests, and hard drugs, although there is a popular use of soft drugs. As I walked through this community, I was shocked to see just how completely different it was in many aspects. People lived amongst nature, as water and trees surround their community. Everything in the neighbourhood is built and run by its inhabitants – from playgrounds, to houses, to restaurants and bars. The citizens there put heavy emphasis on freedom and expression through different forms of art, from paintings and murals, to statues and sculptures.

This experience for me was a witness of the power and will of humankind. For people of Christiania, their strong sense of community and shared values keeps them together and their community alive. As the day went by, I realized that this was a big part of their continual existence. Although only separated by a wall from the rest of Copenhagen, entering Christiania is like entering a world of its own, a world that is possible because of their strong views on the way of life and their determination to live out their beliefs.

This is when I suddenly asked myself, what are my values? What do I envision my way of life to be? What are my beliefs? I immediately realized that finding the answers to these questions would not be easy, and that they could very well change over the course of my life. However, the citizens of Christiania made me recognize the fact that if I really want to live out my dreams one day, I will have to be true to myself and determine what it is that I really want now. I cannot be afraid to dream and look beyond my presumed limits. I need to find where my passion lies and understand what is and is not important to me.

This was a big step for me: it was a moment where pieces of the puzzle suddenly began to come together. As I continued to wander through the community, I reflected on the interview I had with P&G. Being that it was an extremely intensive process, it inherently revealed qualities in myself that I had suppressed or was too afraid to acknowledge. I had always been the one who more or less had a plan. Although I did not necessarily know exactly which industry I wish to work in, I was confident that I was on the right course as I continued down the path of engineering. Yet on this day, I suddenly obtained the courage to question myself: maybe it is because of my need for 'certainty' that I had essentially restricted myself to continue on the same path? This fact was slowly confirmed as I reflecting upon my answers during the interview with P&G. I felt that I conducted the interview fairly well. However, although my answers addressed directly to the questions asked, they were pointing towards something different.

In high school, I was a fairly creative and artistic person. I took many art courses for enjoyment and did well in them. But ever since my enrollment into university, I have imposed a constraint on myself – my focus would be engineering as I had convinced myself that was where my interest lies, and this would be the seeds to my future. My plan for after graduation was to get a stable, well paying engineering job in Toronto, and slowly but surely build my life in the city I have always called home. Yet as I walked through the community of Christiania, I accepted the fact that there is, and should be more to my life than just that. I was inspired to find my beliefs and live them out one day.

Since that day, I tried to remember to question the constraints that I have imposed on myself. Truly, there still exist those that result from fear of the unknown, resistance to change, and lack of confidence. Although I might not be able to change these behaviours overnight, I am trying to keep exploring my life with an open mind. As a child, we were all born with a gift of curiosity. We were not afraid to try new ways of doing things, to explore our horizons, to do the 'unthinkable'. However, as we grow up and are educated about the uncertainties in the world around us, we quickly realize our need for security; and perhaps it is this desire that causes us to forget what it means to be curious.

There are two more months left until I graduate, but the outlook of my short term plans are already extremely different from that of before. Since Christiana, I have tried my utmost to be true to myself, and not let other factors deter me from searching for my aspirations. I no longer view my engineering degree as a restriction to my opportunities, but rather an asset. Through my exchange experience, I now have the courage to believe that what I have and who I am now should not determine who I will become.

To Conclude

I truly believe that the impact of this experience is unique to myself. Therefore, I tell my story not to convince others that going on an exchange is the right path to take, but to make known just how great of an impact an exchange experience could have on an individual.

Some of the paths encountered in life might be a result of uncontrollable factors such as personal circumstance, known opportunities, and luck. However, the danger exists when one attributes what is really a self-imposed constraint to an uncontrollable factor. Surely it is a difficult thing to do, but I have learned to try to identify and question the constraints I have imposed on myself. Understanding and acknowledging the reasons behind their existence and their implications could help one achieve a more self-fulfilling outcome.