REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

ERASMUS WINTER-SPRING 2007

Giant Causeway

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Introduction

My time as an Erasmus student is soon over and now I’m writing my reflective journal. It is funny that this suddenly came to an end. When I signed up to go on Erasmus I did not know what I went to at all. I just wanted to improve my English, get to know the Irish culture and meet new people from other parts of Europe. What I can say is that this has been a fantastic journey and I have had some experiences which I will never forget. That is why I will recommend other students to go on Erasmus if they get the chance. In my reflective journal I will try to give an idea of how my journey as Erasmus student has been for the last three months. The paper is divided in to five parts. A: Academic study, B: cultural programme, C: social programme, D: guidelines for the future students and at the end D: overall reflection on the experience.

A) Academic study

The courses I chose for the period I was here was European History, Divided Societies, Irish film studies, Reflective journal and School based work. I didn’t need marks from the courses I took because I'm writing a paper about the Northern Ireland school system compared with the Norwegian school system. Then I had the opportunity to chose courses out of my own interest and not because I needed to. Before I came here I was worried that it would be difficult to follow the lecturers, but in all the courses I've attended, lecturers have always made sure that everyone understood what they were talking about, especially the Erasmus students.

European History

A very interesting course by Brian Feeney witch I would recommend to other new Erasmus students. I attended 1 hour lectures three days a week, and once a month it was tutorial. Tutorial was quite interesting because we discussed the different topics from the lectures and that is always a good thing to do. The period he lectured in was from the Versailles Settlement and the inter-war years in Europe. Most of us have some knowledge about what happened during this period, and I also studied history for a year at university in Norway, but it was interesting to hear not only the "Norwegian version". For me it was also good to repeat some of it. When I studied history I attended lectures in lecture theatre and we were a larger class compared to the class in this course, and we also had a lot of reading to do. Since Erasmus students do not take the exams, you only attend the lectures and those who needed marks took a multiple choice test.

Divided Societies

This is also a course I would recommend to other new Erasmus students. This course was mostly based on one hour lectures three days a week. During this course we got insight in divided cities in the world and we questioned why a city becomes divided. We also had lectures about Belfast, and if Belfast is a Frontier city. In the end of the course we went on a fieldtrip in Belfast city centre, the catholic area and the protestant areas to see if Belfast still is a frontier city. If you
attend this course you get an excellent opportunity to learn more about Belfast's social and religious conditions in a historic perspective. We had to write a paper in the end of the course and discuss whether Belfast is a frontier city or not.

Irish Film Studies

This course is a must! Once a week during the whole period you get the opportunity to see Irish films. It is easy credits and almost all of the Erasmus students attended this course. You get to experience the Irish life and culture from different perspectives through films, and it is actually very informative. The contents in some of the films were of grave character, but sometimes it can be necessary to do some reflections on life. In the end of the course we had to write a paper about Irish life and culture.

School based work

The first day of school practice our coordinator introduced us to the school we were going to spend the next four weeks in. We got a warm welcome and I felt comfortable from the beginning. I chose the age from 4-8 years in primary school and got the opportunity to be in a P1 class. In Norway we don’t start school until we’re 6 years old, so for me it was quite interesting to see 4 years old children in school. When I come back to University of Stavanger I have to write a paper comparing the Irish school system with the Norwegian school system. I find teaching reading and writing interesting so I want to write about that in my paper. Accidentally the teacher in the class I were in, she has specialised in teaching reading and writing, so I got lots of information and guidance from her, which I could use in my paper. I had a great learning experience in practise and the four weeks flew away. In Norway we do not practise religion in school as they do here, and for me, coming from a protestant country, I found it quite interesting to see that religion is such an important part of the school day.

Reflective Journal

You are reading it now! This is easy credits since you just need to write this paper. Still, it can be wise to keep a diary with your thoughts, experiences and reflections. Then it is much easier to sit down and write the reflection journal. Beside that, for me the reflective journal was a way to think and to process all that I have done and experienced the last three months.
B. Cultural programme

We were four Norwegian girls who lived together and we had decided that we wanted to get the most out of the 3 months we were here. During the stay we got to experience different aspects of Belfast, and we also had the opportunity to do some travelling, which I really recommend other Erasmus students to do. Ireland is a beautiful country and well worth seeing.

The red bus tour

Takes about one hour and you get to see the most important sites of Belfast through Shankill road and Falls road. It is nice to start the exploration of Belfast with a tour on the bus. It is always best to sit on top of the bus because the view I much better, but I would recommend warm clothes!

Giant Causeway

St. Mary’s arranged a bus tour to Giant Causeway in the end of our stay. It took about two hours to get there but it is worth the hours on the bus. The landscape on the way is beautiful, so just bring some good music and enjoy the view from the bus. It was quite windy the day we were there, but that just made the trip more fun. Remember to bring warm clothes, maybe a windproof jacket. In Norway we always say that there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes! Everyone should have the chance to see Giant Causeway and feel the strength of the sea. Enjoy.

St. Georges Market
St, Georges Market is just a short walk from city hall and it is an old building with farmers market every Saturday. Farmers from all around Belfast sell all kinds of food. It is nice to spend the morning at the market and buy lunch to bring home and eat with a cup of tea!

**Belfast Castle and Cave Hill**

In the beginning of our stay all the Erasmus students went on a trip to Belfast Castle and walked from the castle up to Cave Hill. We took the bus from the city centre and walked up to the castle from were the bus stopped. The weather was cold but beautiful. Belfast castle is a small castle but it is worth visiting on the way to Cave Hill. Cave Hill was lovely and the view was magnificent. We could see the city of Belfast from the top, and even over the coastline of Scotland. It was so nice to feel the fresh air and just have a day in the nature.

**Dublin**

It is necessary to visit Dublin when you’re in Ireland. We paid £12 for a return ticket, and took the bus Sunday morning to Dublin and went back to Belfast Tuesday evening. Since all of us were students we stayed in a youth hostel. 6 girls in the same room and we had to share bath with the others on the same floor. The city has great nightlife, shopping, restaurants and cafes. We started the trip by taking a red sight sing bus. Then we got to see the city and hear about its history. It made it easier to know what to see, what museums to go to and where the different sights were situated. Full of adventures, lots of good fun and a couple of hours waiting for the bus, we arrived home late Tuesday night.
Road Trip

If you have the chance to rent a car and go on a road trip, do it! We rented a car, seven girls, and we had a blast! It was GRAND. In the beginning it was a bit strange to drive on the “wrong” side of the road, but after a while it felt normal. We rented the car from Sunday morning until Tuesday evening and went from Belfast all the way to Galway and back. We got to see some of Ireland’ most beautiful places, small towns, castles and the nature along the west coast are just stunning. Both of the nights we spent at a B&B. A youth hostel is the less expensive place to stay over night, but when you are on the road it can be difficult to find, so it is important to do good research and planning before hitting the road.

Botanic Garden

Botanic Garden is a beautiful park not far from Queens University with various flowers, plants and trees. If you have the need to get away from the city noise, do some exercise or just spend a day in green surroundings, then Botanic Garden is a lovely place.
C. Social Programme

When joining the Erasmus in Belfast you will find out quite quickly that it is impossible to be bored. Almost every day there is something going on, and I actually had the need to draw back a couple of times. The first day we came here we got introduced to other students that just had arrived as Erasmus students. From day one if something happened, the word got spread around and everyone was invited to come or join in.

Erasmus Party

After a couple of days we had the first Erasmus Party. This is an excellent way to get to know one another in a non formal setting. We have had such fun at the parties that almost every week a new house invited to a party. If someone had a birthday we celebrated them, occasionally we had a theme for the evening as the get dressed in clothes from the 70 and 80's, wearing a toga and carnival party.

Football

Every Friday, at least the first two months we played football at school for a couple of hours. I had not played football for years, but it was so fun and it was good to get some exercise. This was also a nice way to get to know other Erasmus students.

The Pub

During the week and in the weekend the local pub was a regular meeting place if we were going some place, or just to sit down and have a pint. The pub is also a good spot to meet the locals, and it was new for me, as a Norwegian, to see that all sort of people without regard to age, met at the pub for a drink and a chat. We don't do that in Norway in the same way they do here, but I have to say that I can understand why the pub is such an important part of the culture. For those who live here, it is a part of life.

The mystery tour

The Student Union arranged a mystery tour to a night club in the beginning of the semester. We met in front of St. Mary's and the bus took us to a night club out side Belfast and returned back when it closed. The whole university got the opportunity to buy tickets and join the tour, so it was a nice way to meet other students and to have a great party.

Euro Quiz

Paul Anthony and Briege gathered all the Erasmus students to an evening with Euro Quiz. We got divided in to several groups and the competition was hard. Some of the students invited to an after party where we could celebrate the winners of the quiz.
Eurovision Talent Competition

This was really fun. In the end of our stay we had to represent our country in a Eurovision Talent Competition arranged by Paul and Briege. The evening was filled with a lot of great performances from the various countries. We, the girls from Norway, had a little Grease show, with costumes, moves and singing. By some reason it did not seem to be a hit, since we became the last but one.

D. Guidelines for future students

Do:

• Be prepared that the standard of the house you are going to stay in can be lower than you are used to.
• Pay attention to dog shit.
• Make sure that you bring an adapter or buy one here, you will need it.
• Bring a book about your country or something else that is typical of your country. I brought a book about Norway and also a book with Norwegian folk tales in English. When you are in practise you may need to do a presentation of your country, and then it is nice to have some facts and pictures.
• Bring trousers and blouses you can wear in practise. Teachers dresses more formal than they do in Norway.
• Meet people with an open mind, and remember that we all have different nationality, culture and history.
• Take the tour on the red bus. This is an easy way to get quick knowledge about the city.
• Go on a road trip!
• Bring warm clothes and a wind proof jacket.
• Get a Northern Ireland sim card for your mobile. I got an O2 sim card and could send 200 free text messages to other with an O2 sim card.
• Check the oil frequently, I promise you, it is not recommendable to wake up Sunday morning after a night out, and realize that there is no heating or warm water.

Don't:

• Think that things will be the same as back home, adjustment is necessary.
• Listen to all the gossip. In a small group where people usually do everything together there will be some talking. Try to keep aloof from the gossip.
• Step in to dog shit. The streets are full of dog shit, even though there are sings everywhere, that you can get a ticket if you as an owner do not pick it up.
• Leave your driving licence back home, if you are going to rent a car, you will need it.
• Get into discussion about the political disagreement between the Protestants and the Catholics. The locals have experienced the troubles, you have not.
• Think that you can pack and clean the house the night before you leave, it will always take more time than you think.
• Be afraid to ask the student office or you coordinator for help if you have any questions or problem. They are always very friendly and helpful.
E. Overall reflection on the experience

What can I say? 3 months are gone, and some how I can not understand that it is all over. This was my first experience with studying abroad, and I thought that I could not let the opportunity go. I wanted to improve my English, meet other students from Europe and live in a foreign country for a longer period so I could learn more about the culture. Other than that, I did not have any expectations. I was very fortunate that I could go with other students from my class, and then it was not so scary. We knew that this could be a risk, and that it could be a challenge for us to get to know the other students, since we went as a group, but from the first moment we tried to join all the social activities, and not always go as a group. St. Mary’s, and especially Briege, took care of us from the first moment. She took us to the house we were going to live in and introduced us to other Erasmus students. The standard of the house was not that high, but we got it cleaned and had three great months in it. During the weeks we went to classes at St. Mary’s and I found all my courses very interesting. The period in practise was one of the most informative experiences I did. I gained some really good knowledge which I will keep in mind and try to use when I become a teacher. Our house in Hawthorn Street was close to Falls Road which is the road famous for the murals, and the road that goes through the Catholic area. I found it very interesting but also sensational to see all the murals with a political message situated on private houses. The same phenomenon takes place in Shankill Road, the Protestant area, and it reflect that the political situation is extremely important for people in general, and that it is not only political but also personal. I experienced Belfast city as a divided city, and in a way a frontier city because of the distant I felt between Catholics and Protestants. Maybe this feeling is armoured since I am from a foreign country and felt the contrast coming from a peaceful environment, and lived in the middle of a Catholic area. Yet, most of Belfast is not divided. The City Centre, Queens and other places are areas which I did not find divided. Living in Belfast, and see the scares from the troubles and hear the locals talk about there experiences, gave me a new perspective on life. Knowing that the troubles took place for not more than 10 years ago, made me realize that peace is not something to take for granted.

How did I survive 3 months abroad? I think I manage quite well, and I got friends from other countries that I know I will keep in touch with for a long time. It is important open up the horizon and look to other countries and at the world and keep in mind that you are not alone. The way you live and the culture you come from may not be better compared to others. Especially I think it is important for teachers to get this experience. The world is getting more and more globalize and countries find themselves in a situation where the population no longer has the same nationality. This is something we have to accept. To prevent dislike of foreigners, I thing knowledge about foreign cultures and language can be a way to front this fear. Teachers have the chance to pass on this knowledge and try to educate the children to become understanding and independent persons who will meet people with an open heart and mind. The Erasmus programme gave me the chance to learn about other cultures and way of living which I will try to make use of in the best possible way when I become a teacher.