Reflective Journal

Erasmus 2008/09

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Section A - Academic Study

I attended the following lectures and seminars at St Mary’s University College:

1. Anglo-Irish Literature
   This seminar by Dr Brian Hanratty gives an overview of 19th century literature. We learned about James Joyce’s “Dubliners” and “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”, about William Butler Yeats poems, John Millington Synge’s “Playboy of the Western World and novels by Brian Moore. Mrs Lombard taught the second half of the seminar. We read and discussed poems by MacNeice. The topics were quite interesting for me because I already attended some courses about the Romantic Period at the University of Paderborn.

2. Divided Societies
   During the first weeks, Mrs Keane taught us about some different divided societies like Belfast and Jerusalem. Students participated in an email project. We were divided into groups and worked together with students from Spain and the USA. In my group were two girls from Northern Ireland, an Erasmus student from Poland and my roommate from the Netherlands. In the beginning it was not easy to work together because of the different ways we learn and study at our home-universities. Our task was to discuss and write about nationalities, national symbols and identities.

3. Irish Film Studies
   During this course taught by Paul Anthony we watched extraordinary good movies. Each Monday evening we felt like going to the cinema for free. I learned a lot about (Northern) Irish culture and society, about the troubles and the educational system. In our essay we had to compare four different movies.

4. Comparative Education
   First of all, Paul Anthony gave us an introduction to the Irish educational system. For me, it was a great surprise to learn that the slap had still been in use until 1975. During the following weeks, we had guest lecturers from the USA and from Spain who told us about their local educational systems. It was an interesting experience to compare foreign educational systems and their function and structure to your own one.
5. **The Evolution of the Irish Cultural Landscape**
Tracey McKay explained to us some fascinating geographical phenomena like the bog of Ceide Fields, for example. We learned about prehistoric and historic periods and landscapes all across Ireland. We talked about Mesolithic hunters and gatherers, the imprint of Neolithic people. This course was one of my favourite because it was really interesting and so different to all the courses I usually attend in Germany.

6. **Academic Writing**
We were explained the American way of writing an essay. In Paderborn we learn to write essays in the same way. Structure and procedure are exactly the same. After class, Mr Worley took us to the Beehive and we had a Guinness. In this way, we did not only have the chance to improve our writing skills, but also to socialise within the group.

7. **Reflective Journal**
This self study course gave students the chance to reflect their Erasmus experiences and to order their thoughts. By writing down my expectations and comparing them to my personal conclusions, I realised that my semester abroad was a learning process.

8. **Supervised Project**
Paul Anthony showed us how to outline a website or presentation, how to connect slices in Power Point and how to work with hyperlinks. Alone or in groups of two we created our own project about a topic of our choice.
Section B - Cultural Programme

1 Informal cultural activities

During my stay in Belfast, I first made a **sightseeing tour** by bus with my roommates to get an overview of the city. Together with a roommate I went for a walk in the **Protestant quarter** and took pictures of the amazing **wall paintings**. I had never seen paintings like this. From a far distance, your first impression as a tourist is how colourful the houses are painted and you think “What a nice idea!” But then you come closer and realise that the paintings tell the story of the troubles and of real people who lost their lives.

We (the German girls) were really lucky to have a great coordinator: Gerard McCann. He took us to other parts of the Protestant quarter and to the **wall** by car, explained a lot about the troubles and showed us the **Milltown cemetery**.

With a group of Erasmus-students we climbed **Napoleon's Nose** on a sunny weekend. The view over the city was amazing! We went hiking in the hills and climbed into a cave.

I regularly visited the **City Centre** for shopping or going out. We often went to the **St George's Market** on Friday or Saturday. You get a great deal of free food samples and are stuffed for the rest of the day!

We visited the **Queen's quarter** with a lot of small shops and boutiques and the old Queen’s University. For relaxing, we went to the **Botanic garden** with its **beautiful palm house** and **tropical ravine**.
**Derry**

In October, we went on a daytrip to Derry by bus. Two Irish guys living in Derry showed us the whole city. They walked with us along the beautiful city wall and explained some interesting facts about history and conflicts.

**Dublin**

Together with two Spanish girls, three Americans and one Dutch and two other German girls, I went to Dublin for a weekend. We stayed in a nice youth hostel (Isaac’s Hostel) and slept in rooms accommodating ten persons. First of all, we walked to the Trinity College, and then we went on a guided tour in the National Library including a Yeats exhibition and visited the National Museum of Ireland (Archaeology & History). Later, we went on a Hop-on-Hop-off-Sightseeing Tour by bus. In the evening, we had a lot of fun in the Temple Bar, where we had dinner, listened to some live-music, watched all kinds of artists in the street and had some drinks in the pubs.

The next day we visited Kilmainham Jail which was, according to my opinion, one of the highlights of our Dublin-Trip. The architecture of the building is depressing and reminds one of Foucault’s “Panopticon”. We were shown the small cells where the prisoners lived, we walked through the narrow tunnels and saw the backyard where several prisoners who had been sentenced to death had been shot dead.

A lot of people asked me which city I liked more, Belfast or Dublin. According to my experience, you cannot compare these two cities. Dublin is more touristic, especially areas like the Temple Bar. You meet lots of backpackers from all across Europe. Belfast appears to be more traditional and has an amazing historical background. For me, Belfast’s wall murals are most fascinating than anything else I have seen anywhere in the world. The separation between Catholics and Protestant is only noticeable in Belfast itself and, therefore, creates a special atmosphere.
Road trip
At the end of November I went on a three-days-road trip for with two Dutch friends and one Irish friend. We went to Galway, Carrowkeel, Céide Fields, Sligo and some other cities and sites. We mainly visited tombs, stone circles and bogs.

2 Formal cultural activities for Erasmus students
At the end of October, we visited the Old Bushmill's Distillery and Northern Ireland's most famous place: the Giant's Causeway. The Giant's Causeway is a world heritage site and a geological phenomenon. Its hexagonally shaped stones are 62-65 million years old and formed by lava.

Paul Anthony and Briege Ellis organized some funny and socially important events for us: In the middle of October, we had a Euroquiz. The Erasmus students were divided into groups and had to answer Paul's questions concerning European countries and America. In November there was an Irish Night. We listened to Irish folk music and we ate typical Irish stew and drank some beer. In the end of November we visited the Lord Mayor. In December, students from the same countries had to present something which is typical for their country or region. Groups could choose whether they wanted to sing, dance or play a game.
Section C - Social Programme

For me, it was a new experience to live in cohabitation. Never had I expected to enjoy living together with other international students so much. Our house in Cavendish Square was only a three-minutes-walk away from St Mary’s. To the city centre we had to walk about ten to fifteen minutes only. In the morning we usually had breakfast together, in the evening we cooked together and had dinner with the whole group. During the day, we had almost the same timetable. In our free time we often went shopping together and went out in the evenings. We shared our food and money and did everything together: sightseeing, pub tours, parties and so on. These activities are very similar to those I do at home. In Belfast, you can do all the things that you do in Germany, too. You can go to pubs, to the cinema, to discotheques or restaurants, or you can do sports. As my timetable was not as full as at home, I had more free time than at home and could do what I wanted to do. It was very interesting to spend so much time with people from other countries. That is the reason why I was only in my room for sleeping and never felt alone. The only difference for me was that here the people I liked were always around me. Some of my roommates or of the other Erasmus-students have become very close friends of mine and I am absolutely sure to keep in touch with them.
Section D - Guidelines for future students

Travel
The cheapest way of travelling to Belfast is usually to fly to Dublin instead of flying directly to Belfast. When you arrive in Dublin you take the Aircoach from the airport to Belfast. During a journey of two and a half hours you can enjoy the beautiful landscape. The busses are really comfortable and clean. Instead of buying a single ticket you can also buy the return ticket immediately which is much cheaper.

Accommodation
Whenever you order oil for the heating, make sure that you order a large amount once or twice instead of ordering small amounts of oil regularly. This is how you can save a lot of money.

Roommates
You will live together with people from different foreign countries and everyone has his or her own and unique cultural background. It is only natural that you have different attitudes towards things. It does not make sense to discuss every little problem and argue with your roommates. Just enjoy your time as it does not last longer than only a few months.

Safety
Do not walk alone when it is dark outside (it is getting dark quite early here!), spend a few pounds on a cab or on a bus and you probably get home safer. Avoid dangerous areas during the night, no matter is you walk or take a cab or bus. Do not take taxis that indicate from which area the cap company is. Call a cab company which is located in the city centre (like Fona Cab or Value Cab, for example). Do not take pictures of people while the police are watching you. Even when you are in the city centre and want to take pictures or some buildings, make sure there are no people on the picture. Normally, no one feels offended by that but sometimes the police are really strict about it.

Sightseeing
If you have the time (and I’m sure you will!), you should visit Dublin, Derry, Galway, Sligo and the North Antrim Coast.

Shopping
Compare prices when you go shopping. You can buy cheap and good food in Tesco, Asda or Lidl. Nevertheless, in comparison to Germany food is quite expensive.
Section E
Overall reflection of the experience

Separation/ conflict
I often heard Irish people say that the conflicts were over. In my opinion, that is a really difficult issue. There is still a lot of separation. Catholic and Protestant pupils and students go to different schools and are raised only by people of the same religious background. Generally, all of their friends and neighbours share the same religion. You will probably not realize this separation when you come to Belfast as a tourist and stay here for only a couple of days. But if you stay longer, you will experience some kind of tension. During my stay here, I unfortunately experienced some incidents which were really frightening. But I know that most people in Belfast are very friendly and helpful. Belfast’s inhabitants are usually very open to tourists and most of them ask you immediately how you like the city. It is amazing how much Belfast obviously has changed during the last years. Meanwhile, people from different political groups or of different religious background live together in the same neighbourhoods. This would not have happened some decades ago. That is is the reason why it is so important for tourism to increase in Belfast.

Culture
Shops, food, clothes and prices are extremely different to those in Germany. Medical services in Belfast are quite good, especially for students of St. Mary’s. After comparing the living conditions in Northern Ireland to those of Germany I am convinced that I could live here for a longer time period. I even thought about staying longer or returning to Belfast after completing my studies in Germany.

University
Classes at St Mary’s differ a lot from the classes I normally attend at the University of Paderborn. It was not difficult for me to follow classes and my timetable was not too full. Lecturers make it easy for Erasmus-students and enable them to enjoy their time in Belfast. But at the beginning I had some difficulties in adjusting to students from other foreign countries. In Germany, I am used to work hard, to do a lot of work at home and even when it comes to group work, German students work together sincerely. Students from all across Europe differ a lot in their attitude towards working. Some students take their courses serious; others tend to postpone their work.
Summary

In conclusion, I can say that I really enjoyed my semester abroad. I had one of the best times of my life here in Belfast. On the whole, it was like a never-ending holiday. Every morning when I woke up, I had the chance to decide what I wanted to do and to see. I realised that when I came here in September 2008, I had a lot of prejudices. During my stay in Belfast, I had to adjust to a foreign country. Luckily, the Northern Irish people are outgoing and open-minded. That's why it is so easy to make friends and have fun. Even in places where you do not expect to find someone to have a nice conversation with, people start talking to you. Additionally, I was really surprised how many people are able to speak German even if they know only a few sentences. For me, the city of Belfast is full of contrasts: Belfast is a big industrial city which offers everything one might need. On the other hand, you can always see the hills in the background and other beautiful landscapes are never out of reach. You find working-class areas in West Belfast, for example, but a modern city centre with beautiful old buildings. There is a balance between industry and landscape, between rich and poor areas, between tradition and tourism, between good and evil. Before I came here, I did not have any expectations at all. Maybe, that is the reason why I was happy about every new day in this great city.