Reflective Journal

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St-Mary’s University College
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Section A: academic study

Academic courses in St-Mary’s University College

One of the main aspects of any Erasmus project is the academic aspect. Experiencing foreign education offers a new insight in a different approach on education. As a student of English, history and geography, it seemed only natural to make a selection of those courses that offer some extra background information on these subjects. I therefore selected a variety of different courses, partly focusing on linguistic skills, partly on interesting historical and cultural development.

The attendance of courses such as Anglo-Irish literature and academic writing proved to be of much use, not only to actually further develop one’s linguistic skills, but also because it offers an interesting insight in different teaching methods. Some obvious differences in teaching methods are immediately recognizable. It seems that the Belgian education system focuses much more on the aspect of Grammar than the Irish education system. However, we obviously have to point out that this is mainly because of the fact that English isn’t our mother tongue. During Irish classes and seminars, the teacher generally gives information through a series of explanations and examples. The knowledge is offered to the pupils.

In Belgium, students are expected to work more on individual basis, with an emphasis on group work and self study. This often means that students will derive certain important information themselves, using the deductional method. This may occur through a series of set tasks or outlines, or through an individual project the students organise. Basically, it would seem that in Belgium, there is a bigger emphasis on the concept of self study and individual learning. Naturally, we have to remember that there’s an obvious difference in teaching methods between a university and a high school. High schools often tend to emphasise a practical approach, which may be one of the reasons for the differences in the teaching methods. There are some similarities in ways of evaluation, however. In both Belgium and Northern-Ireland students will mainly be evaluated on written tasks which they have to prepare on individual bases.

Courses as “The evolution of the Irish cultural landscape” and “Irish film studies”, on the other hand, offer the Erasmus student a unique insight in
 interessing parts of Irish culture and tradition, thus certainly enhancing an
Erasmus experience. After all, one of the main reasons to participate in
an Erasmus project is to be able to better understand the foreign culture.

School based work experience

During the Erasmus project we were able to participate in a school based
experience that lasted one month. This experience offered us some
interesting insight in the world of primary-, comprehensive-, grammar-
and secondary school education. Again, there are some obvious
differences in teaching methods when compared to the Belgian system.
Although both countries seem to put a certain emphasis on the method
of visualisation, to aid the pupils in understanding certain information,
Belgian teachers tend to more colourful aids, such as pictures, films and
drawings, whereas the Irish teachers tend to offer aid through written
sources such as slides and PowerPoint, consisting of a basic outline of a
lesson. Again, the main difference consists of the expectations of the
pupils. Belgian pupils are expected to do more work on an individual
level.

All in all, the academic aspect of this Erasmus experience was as I
expected it to be. On the one hand courses that offer students extra
information, which is often difficult to acquire in one’s home country, on
the other hand courses that offer a certain insight in an interesting,
though often stereotyped, society and culture. These courses, combined
with a month of practical experience in a secondary school, certainly give
the student an interesting academic experience to reflect upon.

Section B: Cultural programme

It is rather unimagable that a student would opt for an Erasmus
Experience without showing a
certain interest in local culture and
traditions. I preferred to visit
Northern-Ireland because of my
genuine interest in Irish culture, as
well as a profound interest in
recent history that grasped the city
of Belfast, and the entire of
Northern Ireland, the last 50 years.

This painting of Bobby Sands is one of the most famous
Falls Road Murals
Murals

Although I was certainly aware of a bloody past that occurred in the city of Belfast, I didn’t realise how this could divide a city so thoroughly, even nowadays. One of the first things you become aware of as a foreigner are the many Murals throughout the city and although they tend to be politically biased, they offer an interesting view on the local society and recent Northern-Ireland history.

The city of Derry and the museum of Free Derry

As a part of this interest in history, a trip to certain Northern-Irish heritage sites seemed to be in order. The city of Derry, famous for the “Bloody Sunday” protest, is therefore an excellent example of such a cultural daytrip. Although the picturesque city could be considered a bit of a tourist trap, a walk along the city walls that shield the cosy city centre from the outside world is certainly worth the effort. The small museum of Free Derry gives the tourist a very good, although slightly biased, recollection of the “Bloody Sunday” protest that took place at that exact location in 1972, as well as some background information on how the catholic-protestant troubles started in Northern-Ireland.

Saint-Patrick’s Day

Although a confrontation with the bloody Northern Irish history is inevitable; there are many more interesting Cultural discoveries to be made throughout Northern-Ireland and Ireland. One of these cultural beauties was the much anticipated Saint-Patrick’s day, an event well known throughout the world, but nonetheless typically Irish. The event itself is very enjoyable to attend, with parades and street animations brighten up the streets of Belfast. I have to point out, though, that like so many other popular events throughout the world, Saint-Patrick’s day seems to be very commercial. The well known mythical figure of the Leprechaun is sadly reduced to a capitalist ideal to advertise this event, much as Santa Claus is used to advertise Christmas. It would seem that Saint-Patrick’s day mainly consists of some good, healthy pub-hopping
and, for the more religiously inspired amongst us, an attending of mass, closely followed by a visit to the pub.

**The Republic of Ireland and the city of Galway**

A trip to the Republic of Ireland seemed to be in order, as to really experience the Irish culture and way of life. Therefore, the student’s city of Galway, in the west of Ireland, seemed to be a decent choice for a weekend of cultural enhancing. Again, this weekend turned out to be quite expensive, mainly because of the fact that Galway is a true tourist hotspot.

**Irish sports**

Another interesting cultural aspect, one that slightly overlaps the social aspect as well, is the huge difference in sport preferences. Sport, previously unheard of, such as Hurling and Gaelic football, turned out to be extremely competitive and enormously interesting to watch and play. It seems that sports turn out to be an important aspect in an Irishman’s cultural and social life.

Although I was planning on visiting an enormous amount of cultural hotspots, I have to admit that I underestimated the notion of time. Three months is hardly enough to completely submerge in a wide array of different cultural activities. The locations and sites I visited however were well worth the investment in time and money, and definitely increased my insight in the Irish cultural landscape.
Section c: social life

The clubs and the pubs

Possibly the most anticipated aspect of the Erasmus Programme for any foreign student is the social happenings during our stay. Ireland is well known for its social culture, which mainly consists, much as it is in Belgium, of scouting the local pubs and clubs throughout the city of Belfast. A feat in which we were professionally introduced by the experienced teachers of St-Marys, by means of the famous Pub Tour. Obviously, we weren't disappointed. The pubs in Ireland offer their very own and original atmosphere for natives and tourists alike. An abundance of life music can be found throughout the city almost every day of the week. This life music seems to be an integrated part of Irish culture and offers some extremely entertaining and social experiences. Although the Irish have a legacy of indulging in excessive drinking, this doesn’t seem to be much worse than it is in Belgium. It would seem that this aspect of the Irish culture is largely stereotyped, possibly by film producers, who love to use the Irish culture as a comic relief in their films. Irish people tend to drink more in a shorter period, but this mainly because of the fact that pubs and sometimes even clubs tend to close at 1 PM. This is a feature very unusual for Belgians, who normally start going out around midnight.

Sports and competition

As I previously pointed out, social life was not simply limited to the donation of our hard-earned student’s allowances to the local bartenders. The original and entertaining sports, such as hurling and Gaelic football, kept some of us busy as well. Mainly through the introductions of local St-Mary students we were given the opportunity of trying these rather difficult sports, with entertaining results.
It seems, however, that a certain fondness for the game of soccer is a rather universal thing, as the Irish, as well as the Belgians, tend to be rather fanatical when it comes to supporting different teams.

Although the social aspect of the Erasmus course is mainly meant to relief us of some of the everyday stress, it also proved to be a very interesting medium to further integrate in the local culture. The friendliness of the local people make you feel as apart of the Irish society.

A game of hurling  
A game of Gaelic Football
Section D: A guideline for future students

A good Erasmus student is adventurous. He shows a healthy amount of eagerness to discover and explore new cultures and habits. Although exploration and discovery are vital aspects of the Erasmus Programme, a little organisation has never done an adventurer any harm.

In the next few lines I'll write down some practical pointers, some handy hints and some tasty tips for the next generation of Erasmus explorers.

Do's!

- Do attend the college events; it’s a great way to get to know the other students and college teachers alike.
- Do bring warm clothes, the winter periods can be rather cold.
- Do bring an adaptor, nothing as frustrating as finding yourself in a house where you can't use electricity.
- Do use some of your free time to go on out on trips to the Republic Of Ireland.
- Do keep a good relationship with your co-ordinator. He / She might be very useful at times.
- Do keep in touch with your landlord; he can help you in times of need.
- Do keep a close eye on your oil level; it's rather uncomfortable to live in a cold house.
- Do watch where you walk, the streets are littered with unpleasant, and smelly, surprises!

Don’ts!

- Don’t bring too many clothes; they practically give them away in Belfast!
- Don’t forget some formal clothes for School Based Work.
- Don’t expect your student’s houses to be like home; Erasmus partly consists of being integrated in a local society.
- Don’t be too narrow-minded, you will experience a different culture and are expected to cope with that.
- Don’t forget to bring some aspirins, they’ll work wonders after a decent night of clubbing!
- Don’t spend too much time coped up inside your houses!
Section E: Overall experience

Throughout our three years of education to become a fully qualified teacher certain chapters and memories could be considered key points of one’s development, the Erasmus experience will surely be an example of these chapters. I came to Belfast city with a profound interest in the English language, which is obviously required to fulfil my teacher’s duties, a healthy dose of interest in the Irish culture and some genuine curiosity for this adventurous experience in general. I fully expected to learn more about the local culture and way of life of the Irish. Certain images on this topic were given to us, partly through some self study, partly through the medium of television, were the Irish culture is often integrated in films and series alike. It was therefore very interesting to be able to separate some of these stereotypical images from the truth, while others proved to be spot on.

The idea of diversity is, more than ever, a very popular topic. This Erasmus Experience in Belfast has not only given me a better insight in the Irish culture, but also offered ample opportunities to meet other students from throughout Europe and the United States. Although the good bonding between the Erasmus students decreases the amount of time you actually spend with native Northern-Irish people, it still develops a most interesting insight in a diversity of different cultures, all trying to achieve a similar goal.

Like I said before, my main interest for participating in this experience was to enhance my own knowledge on the local culture, a goal which I feel I achieved, not only through the social contacts one will inevitably experience, but also through many interesting cultural excursions. Even the academic courses, offered in St-Mary’s, play an important role in this development.

All in all, three months of Erasmus isn’t nearly enough to plan or see all the things one first intents to visit. Once again, the notion of time seems to be completely relative. But we could consider this to be a positive thing. On one hand I was offered enough opportunities to experience my Erasmus Project to the fullest, being confronted with a different style of teaching methods and approaches, as well as enjoying the laid-back Irish culture, which rather differs from the ever hasty Belgian culture. On the other hand the experience left me with a feeling that there are still enough potential points of interest to revisit the city of Belfast in a later stage.

Although I’m left to pounder over a generally good feeling, it are the events that are less pleasant that make an Erasmus experience really
interesting. Things we cannot predict are always bound to occur during an adventure like this. I’m thinking of a broken heating system in our house, an unwelcome and unexpected visit of the Flu, facing a real challenging group of children during School Based Work, amongst many others. It is in these times, however, that we can reflect upon our own experience and social skills to solve these potential problems. Furthermore, this creates an attitude of friendship and trust between all the different students, as being part of the Erasmus Experience means you’re never on your own.

I will gladly advice every student able to attend the Erasmus programme to enjoy it to the fullest, because after all, this is a once in a lifetime experience, and the memories are bound to last a lifetime.