Armelle Marie Lefebure’s Reflective Journal

The Erasmus Experience 2008/2009

Section A:

St. Mary’s University College offers a great variation of courses to their international students. Although many of the courses are directed toward student teacher, the school offers several courses taken out of the cultural and history models. Through those modules, the school aims to enlighten the students understanding of Ireland's position in Europe.

St. Mary’s make it very attractive for its ERASMUS student by offering this range of courses, the courses include politics, history, business studies, literature, cultural courses and ERASMUS courses only (Irish film studies among some). The only ERASMUS courses are important to ensure the social aspect of ERASMUS and help the ERASMUS student to connect among each other.

The teaching methods for the teacher varied according to the modules; the politics and cultural courses mostly included the use of power point and by putting the lectures on the P drive the teachers made it easy for the student to follow the lecture and take notes. The main difference between the method of teaching between St. Mary’s and University College Volda, sums up to the amount of student attending the courses; Since the biggest lectures in Volda includes about 300 to 450 students in a lecture auditorium, the courses at St. Mary’s featuring less students were therefore more intimate and allowed the students to connect more among themselves and to get more direct contact with the teachers. Another important difference between the two institutions is the use of seminars; St. Mary’s requires student attendance in some of their seminars (politics and cultural courses after my experience).

Throughout the academic year I attended mostly liberal art courses. I grew very fond of the politics courses (Citizenship and Identity and contemporary society) as well as the cultural courses (Unity in diversity, divided society). These courses would never been accessible for me to attend following the academic program at University Volda, and I am therefore very grateful toward the school for letting me attend them. The Anglo-Irish literature course was of specific interest as it focused on Irish authors from Joyce to Heaney and Shaw. The literature module in Volda focused primarily on time line (pre-1850 and after 1850) and included very few Irish authors. The literature course at St. Mary put the authors in contrast to history and gives a better understanding in the thematic of the literature. The History modules are also very important for the international students as it allows them to understand more profoundly the history of the island and the background for its present politics. This is important as it enhance the international students understanding of Irish culture and life.

Section B:

The Cultural programme provided for the international student at St. Mary’s is both diverse and satisfactory. Throughout the academic year, the school organised several trips and cultural events. The historical Pub tour is the one I believe that has the highest student attendance. It provides the new arrived students to get familiar with the city and get a feeling of the Irish pub culture. The historical aspect of the tour is highly intriguing in terms of politics as several of the pubs where once used actively during the troubles.

Belfast and its surroundings are worth exploring in terms of scenery. Closest to city centre a small group of us went to Cave hill. The walk itself is very agreeable and the view from the top of the hill is absolutely fantastic.
I and Heather Krell from last semester went to a daytrip to visit those spectacular sceneries surrounding Belfast.

Our first stop was at the Kerrickfergus castle.

The castle played an important role in for Anglo-Norman hold of Ulster. It represents over 800 years of military might, and has being held by various nations; Scots, Irish, English and French. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (hereby referred to as NIEA) writes on their website that the long and complex history of the castle is reflected on its remaining structures.

Next stop was at Carrick A reed to cross the “death defying rope Bridge”. We were extremely lucky with the weather and the scenery was perfect. The rope Bridge was built primarily for fishermen to accommodate their fishing facilities. Today the area is famous first of all for its coastal scenery and wonderful flora and geology.
We preceded our journey to the Giant’s Causeway, the definite highlight of the tour. The causeway is resplending in history and culture. There is an echo of myth and legend hidden behind its coastal scenery. Several ships has foundered below the cliffs, the most known would be the Girona, a galleass of the Spanish Armada. This place does however not leave any signs of this tragedy; at it is purely wonderful and spectacular sight.

The rest of the semesters included several other cultural escapes, including a trip to Dublin for St. Patrick’s Day.

However, one of the most agreeable events for me was the Belfast Film Festival. I got the chance to see several films, documentaries and to meet some directors of those movies. The Festival was very enjoying and contributed to my personal understanding of internationalisation.
The highlight of the Cultural aspect of the stay would have to be the international week. St. Mary’s managed to gather an assembly of different nations to share experiences and knowledge. The week was highly successful and both staff and student were pleased by its pedagogical and social aspect. With regards to globalisation and internationalisation, the week was important as it emphasised St. Mary’s wishes to truly be an international institution.

Section C:

There is no doubt in my mind that the Irish way of life is very different from the Norwegian way. I also do believe that the ERASMUS way of life combined with the Irish’s creates a very peculiar way to socialise. St. Mary’s works hard to ensure that all its ERASMUS students get along and socialise in appropriated manners. With relation to that, they organise quiz and Eurovision night.

The students on their own seem to find it important to socialise outside school arrangements. One important difference between the first and second semester is that the student in the second semester seems to get along better. The red Devil became second semester student’s pub, our local spot, and we truly appreciate to have our own place to go. To the staff we are now regulars. Although one could argue the red devil is not the best place to go out to, we find it to be more welcoming then other pubs in Belfast.

The social life in Belfast compared to the social life I had back in Volda is very different; this mainly due to the difference of sizes. Volda has a population of 5000 whereas 3000 are students. There are four places to go out to, and the closest bigger city is 30 pounds and two hours away. I can therefore say without a doubt that my social life in Belfast is of much greater importance then in Volda. There is also an important difference in terms of pub-life, as the pub life in Norway none exists. It took me quit a while in the beginning to find my personal “hot spots” where I seem to have the best time.

I also find it easier to connect with local Irishmen then with Norwegian. Norwegian has a reputation of being a closed people and they usually need a couple of beers before they open up. Irish on the other hand seems to live by the “A stranger is a friend you have not yet met” philosophy.

In terms of economy, Belfast is much cheaper then Norway. A pint in town would cost approximately 3 pounds, while in Norway for a pint you would have to pay between 5 and 6 pounds. This makes it easier for me personally to invest more money in the social aspect of living in the big city, wherever it should be going to the movie house, theatre, to a pub or just shopping.
Section D:

In terms of travelling, students coming to live in Ireland should remember the following, first of all, the bad weather is not a myth; it is a brutal reality. Waterproof backpack, shoes and coats is therefore strongly recommended. If one wish to travel around the island a travelling guide would be a great help. Ireland for Dummies, became one of my best friends while I lived here, it gives a great account on the historical aspect of the tourist attraction and give excellent tips on where to stay.

Some of the student from last semester did the “Paddy wagon” that visits the south of Ireland, if one liked organised trips; this is not a bad idea. Personally I prefer to do my trip by ear. I visited both Dublin and Kilkenny as I have friends living there, however I would not recommend anybody to travel on their own, especially girls. One should instead find a travelling partner and explore the island together.

In terms for accommodation students traveller has several options. Hostels.com has an overview of hostel and bed and breakfast around the island. The guests are also asked to evaluate the hostels and are therefore trustworthy. If one wishes to have free accommodation one can visit the website www.couchsurfing where one can find a couch to sleep in for a night or two. One should use verified members to be on the safe side and always let somebody else know where one will be sleeping that night. A personal favourite of mine is to bring a sleeping bag and sleep at the airport, free and relatively safe, however comfort wise it is not the best.

When it comes to Belfast, one has to always be aware of the fact that the political situation is still a bit tense. One should therefore always keep that in mind when starting a conversation. One should not tell anyone where one live (as west is catholic republican, you do not want to tell anybody about it) you should also be careful of expressing your political views. The conflict situation in Belfast is very difficult and complex for visitors to understand, and if one says too much one may appear to be arrogant and disrespectful.

One thing that I have noticed during the academic year is that some of the Erasmus students have a lot of learning to do. For some of them, this is the first time away from home and the freedom gap is very important; this especially in terms of the accessibility to alcohol, and pub and clubbing culture. If one goes out in a small group, it is wise to have at least one person that is sober enough to get everybody home. If your alcohol tolerance is low (as mine personally is), it might be wise to let your fellow student know about it, so that they keep an eye on you.

One should also always have at hand the following phone numbers

Police 112
Ambulance 999
Fona cab 02890333333

Apart from that, simple use of common sense is recommended, personally I always travel and explore new country by this rule “never put yourself in a situation you can’t get out of” and if you should get yourself in a tricky situation, improvise.

Section E:

I only had one requirement for my ERASMUS year; first of all I wanted to go to an English speaking country second of all I did not want this country to be England. This made
Ireland/Northern Ireland as my first and only choice. The reason for the second requirement is due to the fact that I did not want to go where everybody goes. Norwegian students are famous for going to England especially to Newcastle and Edinburgh. Later, when I will be looking for a job I want my interviewer to say “Oh, Belfast, now that’s interesting!”

What could be more interesting then Belfast? As a person that travels a lot especially to the big cities of Europe, I have noticed that many of them resemble each other too much and carry the big city factor. Because Belfast is still young, it has not been affected by this yet. It is a unique capital, especially in term of architecture that has strongly affected by the political situation. The big difference between the first and second semester is the social life, second semester students seemed to be more gathered and one big group rather then many small groups. We gather around often for movie nights, sudden trips to Galway and other. Every Sunday evening we go the red devil and listen to live music. These small but important traditions have contributed to the bounding of the group and this year departure will be significantly sadder then first semester.

I honestly did not know what to expect from my ERASMUS year. I have a tendency to not believe in expectations as it often leads to disappointment, however, never have I regretted coming to Belfast. The ERASMUS experience in itself was satisfying, but what made this year amazing to me is the local Irish people I have met and Belfast city itself. However, my biggest surprise was modules. Having a very strict and chosen program in Norway, my courses were mainly directed towards teacher students and included a lot of pedagogical material. As I am not in training to become a teacher nor do I wish to be (I simply do not have to patient for it) the courses from the liberal arts at St. Mary’s suited me to perfection; especially the politics and cultural courses that I found very rewarding.

The Erasmus year has been very helpful to me as it had helped me to create stability in my life. I am a person that always have moved around from place to place and lives no more then 6 months in one place, during the last three years I have moved 6 times. But for the first time since I can remember, I am genuinely happy by staying where I am, and I have no wish to leave Belfast just yet. I am therefore extremely happy that St. Mary’s allows me to stay on and pursue my studies. I hope that my presence at St. Mary’s will be helpful when welcoming new Erasmus students and although my Erasmus year will finished I do believe it will not be completely over.