Erasmus

Reflective Journal

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Before arriving in Leuven, Belgium, I did not know what to expect; I felt excited yet slightly nervous at the same time. However, on my first day at KH Leuven (Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven) I soon realised that there was nothing to worry about. As soon as I set foot in the university immediately I felt at home. KH Leuven is a university college, and is similar in size to St. Mary’s, with a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Not before long, we were able to find our way around the university college. In KH Leuven, we were placed in the teaching department within the university and so this meant that everything we were learning related directly to the teaching programme. This was truly beneficial to us, as it complemented our learning from back home at St. Mary’s. Within our teaching programme, our course was divided up into several different modules:

1. Teaching for Thinking (looking at
2. A Hundred Languages
3. Teaching Practice
4. Education and Environment
5. Cross-cultural communication
6. Dutch language course

Each of these modules had a different focus. For example, within ‘Teaching for Thinking’ we explored such concepts as “Teacher beliefs and the Hidden Curriculum”. Within this we considered how our own beliefs shape our teaching. This encouraged us to consider how much education has changed since we ourselves were at school, and brought us into a discussion about the Revised Curriculum in Northern Ireland. It was interesting sharing our own viewpoints with those within the class, and getting the chance to draw
comparisons, as well as to see the similarities, with our own education system and that in Belgium, as well as that within the other cultures in our International classroom. Within this module, we kept an ongoing log of each of our classes, wherein we were encouraged to critically think about what we had learnt and reflect on it by relating it to our own previous experiences and to our learning outside the classroom. I found this log thoroughly valuable as it encouraged me to really think about what we had learnt and how it connects to my own life as a teacher.

In addition to this, within the ‘Teaching Practice Module’, we got the opportunity to visit several different schools within Belgium, from pre-school right up to secondary level. One visit I found most interesting was when we went to the ‘Freinet’ school. The Freinet School is based on the ideas of the French teacher, Célestin Freinet who believed in developing a method of education which appealed to the interests of children. He took time to get to know children and try and understand what they actually liked. The school has been open for five years and was initially opened due to the growing numbers in the Freinet School in Mechelen. The school doesn’t look at academic studies at the most important area but rather takes more of a holistic approach and looks at the development of the child emotionally as well. In this school the children do a lot of project work but it isn’t a class project that the teacher picks. Each child picks what they want to base their project on. The school setup acts a facilitator for the child to grown in independence. Also, if there is a problem it is left to the children to sort it and then they learn from their mistakes.

Before arriving at the Freinet school we had to prepare a lesson which we were to teach in pairs. Myself and Pauline Savage worked together on our lesson which was taught to a 1st grade class; the lesson was based on Irish culture. We introduced our lesson by discussing some
important features of Irish culture, we used images as a visual aid, and included pictures of shamrocks, leprechauns, the Irish flag, traditional Irish music and dancing. This got the children engaged and they were able to participate in the discussions. Following this, we taught the children an Irish dance. Initially Pauline and I demonstrated the Irish jig to the children and then we did it all together as a group. We practiced it several times and then we performed it together along with traditional Irish music, to the song ‘Belle of Belfast City’. The children got the opportunity to come into the middle of the circle and dance along with a partner of their choice. The children thoroughly enjoyed this activity – there was a lot of laughter!

After this, we carried out an art activity. As potatoes are the staple diet of the Irish people, we thought it would be a great activity to use potatoes as prints. Pauline and I had prepared the potatoes by pre-cutting them into the shape of a shamrock. The children then had to dip their potato into green paint, and print on a piece of card. They all made their own shamrock cards, and put their names below. The children had a lot of fun with this and enjoyed expressing their creative side.

My experience of teaching in the Freinet school was a very positive one. The children reacted well to the stimulus we provided and the different tasks which were set. I think that this was experience was so enjoyable because I feel I learnt a lot myself through it. In particular, it was interesting to observe how the children
reacted to our teaching style. When carrying out our art task, the children were extremely well behaved. This was a surprise to me, as I expected otherwise, considering the amount of freedom these children have within the school; I expected it to be a lot more chaotic! This showed me that if we give children more responsibility in our schools, then in turn they will work to their full potential. Due to the great deal of independence the children have in this school, it meant that they were able to respond to the task in a mature sense, as they had been given responsibility throughout their school lives, and so they knew exactly how to react accordingly.

I really feel that getting the chance to visit and teach within the Freinet school really allowed me to gain new skills as a teacher. I feel children should be given more responsibility, as when they are entrusted with something, they will take more care of what they are doing, as they are being depended on. Through this, they will acquire transferable skills which will permeate throughout their lives. This is something which I have taken on board and will constructively try to put into practice in my future years ahead within the classroom.

I feel that the ‘Teaching Practice’ module was a thoroughly worthwhile and enjoyable course. The visits we made enabled us to observe and gain an insight into school life within a different country. We could observe similarities and differences to our schools here within Northern Ireland. Through these visits we were able to take the positives on
board and aim to apply them to our own teaching; with new and innovative styles and methods which will build on that which we already possess.

Throughout all of our modules which were outlined above, the teaching method applied to us, was very similar to that in St. Mary’s. The teacher made use of visual aids, such as PowerPoint presentations and images. In addition, as the classes were very long (up to 4 hours) the lessons were often split up, through the use of different teaching strategies. We carried out group-work, paired work, whole class debates and discussions, warm up and warm down activities and individual personal work. This meant that we were engaged throughout the lesson as we were actively involved and participating. We had different workshops and went on several different excursions, which really allowed us to get to know our classmates. In all, I feel the academic programme provided for us at KH Leuven was engaging, as we were actually interested in what we were doing and so as a result, were actively involved in the learning process.
Belgium is one of the newer countries of Western Europe, having gained its independence less than 200 years ago. Belgium has a long and colourful history of political and cultural upheavals; and is now divided into two main regions, the Flemish (Dutch) speaking Flanders and the French-speaking Walloonia. Despite the fact that it does not have one unifying language within the country, and that it is divided into two very distinct regions, the country of Belgium as a whole has many famous characteristics, that give the country an identity, some of which you may or may not be aware of! These include:

- Beer
- Waffles
- Chips and mayonnaise
- Mussels
- Architecture (distinctive buildings)
- Chocolate

I think it is fair to say that we got the opportunity to experience all of the above during our stay in Belgium. During our time, we visited many historic cities and towns in Belgium, such as Brugges, Ghent, Ypres, Antwerp, and Brussels. Our trip to Brugges was organised within our class, as a group excursion as part of our ‘Education and Environment’ module. Here we learnt all about the history of Brugge, which has become known as the ‘Venice of the North’ due to the fact that the town is built on water. Here in Brugges, we sampled chocolate from famous chocolatiers and got the chance to visit a beguinage (A Béguinage is a collection of small buildings used by Beguines, which were several lay sisterhoods of the Roman Catholic Church, founded in
the 13th century in the Low Countries, of religious
women who sought to serve God without retiring
from the world); a truly insightful experience.

Furthermore, we visited the WW1 battlegrounds in
Ypres. This I feel really allowed us
to grasp the historical significance of Belgian’s past;
which led us to gain an understanding of why it is as
it is today. Within this trip we were given a tour of
the trenches, the battlefields, with the different lines
of attack. We were also taken to different museums
which provided visual images, sculptures and
artifacts from the war time. This trip I feel allowed us
to gain an understanding of Belgian history, as well
as to learn about what place the Irish had within the
First World War, which was a lot more than what I
had initially thought!

As we were living within the town of Leuven, we felt it was important to get to know the
history of the town which was to be our home for 3 months. We decided to go on a
guided tour of Leuven, which brought us to its many famous buildings and statues. Along
with the tour, and with the help of our Belgian friends who had lived in Leuven a long
time, we soon felt we knew all there was to know about the town.
As well as this, we attended the ‘Carnival de Binche’, which really allowed us to learn something else new about Belgian culture and tradition. For 3 days in February the town of Binche is transported back to the 16th century for a fantastic festival. Highlighted by music parades and fireworks, the climax of this event is when the Gilles appear on the Grand Place and throw oranges to the spectators. This infamous festivity has been classified by UNESCO along with its renowned Gilles. It really was an unforgettable experience. Below is a photo of us joining in on the parade!
As well as learning about Belgian culture, we also got an insight into different cultures from all around the world, due to the different people within our international classes. To name but a few, we in particular got to know a lot about the culture within Austria, Germany, Slovakia, France and Turkey. Through meeting these people from all over the world, I feel that I have deepened my understanding of different cultures, and have made real friends through this experience, who are from all walks of life. It has really broadened my horizons. In turn, this made us very proud of our own Irish culture and heritage; everyone was keen to learn about our lifestyle. We gave them an insight to this on St. Patrick’s Day when everyone came to the Irish pub in Leuven to celebrate and join in the festivities!
Leuven is the capital of the province of Flemish Brabant in the Flemish Region, Belgium. Leuven is home to the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, the largest and oldest university of the Low Countries and the oldest Catholic university still in existence. As a result, Leuven is a real "student city", as during the academic year most citizens in its centre are students. Leuven sports one of the liveliest bar scenes in Belgium. Besides boasting the "longest bar" in Belgium, it has the ‘Oude Markt’, (Old Market in English) which has dozens of bars and cafés crammed into a central square in Leuven. Here is where myself and the other International students did most of our socialising. In the ‘Oude Markt’ the bars and clubs are situated all in the one place, meaning that it was an easy meeting point for everyone. The nightlife here was always buzzing and you were always guaranteed to have a good night when you came here! In particular, the atmosphere was lively during the summer days, when all the seats where put outside in the square, and here you could sit outside with a drink on a warm summer day or evening. In addition to this, in Leuven we had our very own Irish pub! This was great for myself and the rest of the St.Mary’s students as we felt right at home here, and were soon friends with the other Irish bar staff. We introduced our International class to the Irish pub on several occasions, all of which ended with a bit of a sing-along with guitar! They got to experience the true traditional Irish music!
Furthermore, we took advantage of the cheap railway system during our weekends and breaks during our stay. We travelled to several different Belgian towns and cities, which I have mentioned above, but during our Easter holidays we travelled a little further a field. For 5 days, we flew out to Italy along with some other Erasmus students, as we were lucky to get cheap flights with Ryanair. We stayed in Milan and went to Venice during our stay in Italy. It was a great experience, as we got to see many of the famous sights here and experience the Italian culture and traditions. Going to Venice, in particular was an amazing experience and is somewhere I would definitely visit again!

Overall, there was nothing negative to say about the social aspect of Leuven, there is always something to do or see, and the town really is catered towards students. It is different from Belfast nightlife in that you don’t go out until a lot later at night, as a lot of the bars and clubs stay open all night. During the summer days, if our classes ended early or it was the weekend, we would often go and sit in the large park in Leuven and enjoy the sunshine with ice-cream of course! Its vivacious and vibrant atmosphere means that in Leuven you will never get bored!
Section D – Guidelines for future students

Myself and another St. Mary’s student had a difficult start to our Erasmus experience, as initially we had not expected to go to the university in KH Leuven, having been placed at another institution in a different part of Belgium. Due to accommodation difficulties, as well as problems with this university, we were soon moved to Leuven and were enrolled for our course at KH Leuven University College, where we spent the rest of our time. However, this meant that we arrived into our course a little later than everyone else. Although we had arrived later, we soon settled into the class well and felt like we had been there from the start! Advice I would give regarding this is that if you are not happy about something, voice how you are feeling, as something can be done to help. Having this shaky start I think made us appreciate our experience all the more, as we felt so fortunate to have been placed in such a brilliant university in such a lively town! Below I have outlined several ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’, for any prospective Erasmus students.

**Do’s**

- Bring the right clothes – warm clothes for the month of February and shorts and t-shirts for the months of April and May. We had not expected the weather to be as sunny as it was especially at Easter time, and so we had ended up buying appropriate summer clothes out there.
- Investigate about rail cards as soon as possible. In Belgium we invested in a GO Pass which allowed us to make 10 trips within Belgium for only 50 euros. It enabled us to save money whilst we travelled.
- Find a local Lidl or Aldi supermarket.
- Bring a laptop, as most of the student accommodation has internet access. It is a good way to keep in contact with home.
- Bring a file block for class.
- Before leaving home, investigate about getting a bankcard that does not charge at bank links, as the bank links in Belgium charged us at least £1.50 to withdraw money every time we used it.
- Bring things from home which relate to Irish culture such as the flag, images from Ireland etc. We had to teach a lesson on Ireland and so it was often difficult finding resources to use.
- Investigate about getting a Belgian sim card for your mobile phone – it is a cheaper way to keep in contact with friends and family from home.
- Bring posters and photographs from home to decorate your room.
- Take advantage of your free time there! Visit other cities and countries, experience the different foods and traditions, organise group activities with your Erasmus class and get involved!
- Practice the language at every opportunity, in shops and restaurants; even if your ability is not great, the effort is appreciated!

**Don’ts**

- Pack too much. I ended up bringing a lot of clothes that I didn’t actually wear, so try and be sensible with what you are packing.
- Live out of your suitcase – unpack your clothes into your wardrobe and make your room feel homely with photos and posters.
- Get separated from the group on a night out – go out in big groups and stick together, it is a lot safer.
- Forget to take photos!
Section E – Overall Reflection on the experience

As I said at the beginning of my journal, when I first set out on Erasmus, I really did not know what to expect. But the experience that I had over the past three months is one that I will never forget. I feel that through this experience I have changed personally in a positive way. I am now open to different cultures and traditions and now feel I will and can give anything a go! By meeting different people from all different walks of life, I have learnt that I can get on with anyone, despite differences in culture and opinion; I have been fascinated to learn all about the different cultures from around the world. I feel living in a different country for three months has increased my sense of independence, and made me realise that I can do a lot more for myself than I initially thought!

Not only has this experience developed me personally, but it has too professionally. I feel I have acquired new skills and ideas from experiencing classroom life and the world of teaching in a different country. During our visits to the different schools in our ‘Teaching Practice’ module part of the course, I feel I learnt a lot which has been thoroughly beneficial to my role as a teacher. By giving the children these kinds of opportunities offered in these schools, we will be allowing them to express themselves and develop such associated skills. The Revised Curriculum aims ‘to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives’. By taking from the way of teaching promoted in these schools and introducing the positive elements within our own schools at home, I feel this is exactly what we would achieve –young citizens who can achieve their potential and in turn, will make responsible decisions throughout their lifetime. As a result, this is something which I intend to work on in my future years as a teacher, both within St.Mary’s and in my professional school life.

One thing that I believe is that, no matter where you are, it is the people that make the experience. This can definitely be said of my time on Erasmus. I feel that by making good friends with people from all over the world, from countries such as Austria, Slovakia, Turkey, Germany and Belgium, I have been able to broaden my mind and delve into the multi-cultural environment! As well as allowing me to make great friends from across the globe, this has also benefited me as it has encouraged me to be aware of multi-culturalism
within the classroom, as I myself have now experienced being somewhere away from home for a long time, and so I will be more aware of how a child in my classroom may be feeling.

I think the Erasmus experience has really opened my eyes for the real world. I have always loved travelling and now feel all the more passionate about it! I think that Erasmus has allowed me to see and come into contact with things that I would never have had the opportunity to otherwise. It has broadened my understanding of different cultures, and allowed me to see the similarities and differences with our own lives and how I live at home in Ireland. It made me proud of my nationality, and I felt keen to share it with our International friends.

Despite the problems we faced initially, and the fact that we had to move universities at the start of our experience, I have nothing negative to say about my time on Erasmus. It has taught me a lot about myself, and has really opened my mind to the possibility of teaching and working in a different country for a part of my life. I feel that I really took well to facing new challenges; and I loved having the freedom and independence to live as I wanted for a few months! All aspects of the experience have been rewarding; academically I have developed my own knowledge within the realm of teaching, and have witnessed different approaches and strategies which I can take on board when I am teaching; socially and culturally I have become more aware, and therefore I have become more open-minded - a lot of my prejudices have now gone. The Erasmus experience is something which I would highly recommend to anyone; if you are open to new opportunities and not afraid to take on a challenge, Erasmus is the experience for you. It truly was unforgettable, and an experience I loved so much, that it was hard getting me to come back home! Already, we are planning when we will be going back to visit Leuven!