Reflective Journal

ERASMUS in Belfast
St. Mary’s University College
Winter term 2006

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**Academic Study**

It is nearly five months ago when I arrived at the Belfast City airport filled up with feelings of excitement and fear at the same time concerning the following stay abroad in a foreign country. But after my coordinator picked me up and gave me a very informative and interesting tour around the city and the St. Mary’s University College, I knew there is no point of being afraid at all. Everybody was pretty kind and helpful right from the beginning and St. Mary’s is without doubt a pleasant place to study. The building is small, a fact that makes the atmosphere friendly and familiar since everybody seems to know each other. I appreciate the personal relation between teachers and students since I am not used to call a lecturer by his first name and the small sizes in class offer an opportunity to communicate with the teacher during as well as outside the lesson.

For me as a future teacher the most interesting course was by all means the *School Based Work* since you get the possibility to gain insight into a foreign school system, get to know different teaching methods to be able to compare the various ways of focusing on specific subjects or methods respectively. The first semester contains a one week school practice whereas I was able to stay in school for three more weeks during the second semester.

Both schools are primary schools and they resembled a lot concerning teaching methods and the obvious importance on discipline and religious education. I enjoyed this period of time during the teaching practice a lot since I got the possibility to gain insight a different school system and
working with the children helped a lot improving my language skills as well as social skills. Although I appreciated the work in class and the kindness I experienced by the stuff, I was surprised by the strict and frequently passive methods of teaching since I am not used to focus on discipline that much. The lessons are mainly teacher centred and the children seem to be bored since they are not able to develop language or mathematical skills in an active and independent way. They have to sit with folded arms, listen and copy texts from the blackboard.

In my opinion children should learn to work independently as soon as possible to appropriate important skills at their own, to find out their strong points and to support them. Beyond it, it is important to learn acting like individuals who have own opinions and a possibility to think critically. I got the impression that teachers and pupils are two separated groups working not together but rather against each other. The teachers told the children what to do, admonish them stop doing things several times and it seemed that the children are not taught to develop their own thoughts or ideas.

I think the teaching methods the children experience throughout their school life is the reason for a lack of conversation during the lectures in university. The students are very quiet, they rarely talk or discuss. They seem to have neither questions nor ideas or own thoughts that could be different from the teachers’ ones.

For this reason some of the lessons in college were a bit dreary as I am used to exchange thoughts and communicate during the class. I believe it is particularly necessary for future teachers to practice talking in front of an audience to develop rhetoric skills.
Apart from *School Based Work* I chose *Irish History* since I did not have a lot of knowledge concerning the political situation in Ireland before my arrival in Belfast. I liked to learn about the history to understand the problems of the *Troubles* years ago and the current situation.

The class was run by Peter Collins and is in my opinion one of the most interesting ones. The teaching methods are quite similar to my home university since the lecturer speaks most of the time while the students are listening and taking notes. Peter Collins managed to create his way of lecturing interesting and even for foreign students understandable by explaining the most important backgrounds pretty detailed. A difference to my home university would be the size of the classes for they contain about 30 students in St.Mary’s while the lectures in Paderborn can be up to 200 students. Because of this fact I was a bit disappointed about the lack of conversation and discussion in class. In my home university conversation is not possible due to the size of the lectures but here the students do not seem to be interested in it.
Cultural Programme

Since I have never been to Ireland before but heard a lot of its beauty coasts and breathtaking sceneries I decided to make a trip around Ireland before my stay in Belfast. For this reason I arrived one week before the beginning of the courses and explored the south west of Ireland together with two friends of mine in an organised bus trip.

We started the four days bus trip in Dublin and headed first to Galway. Unfortunately we had just a few hours to look around the city since it seemed to be a nice town with a lot of things to see and do. From Galway we went down the west coast and while visiting the Cliffs of Moher and Dingle Peninsula I saw the most beautiful sceneries I have ever seen.

The west coast is even more dramatic and breathtaking than the north coast and I really recommend it as a ´must see´ during a stay in Ireland! After staying one night in Dingle, we drove further down to Kilkenny and back to Dublin. I loved this trip a lot because we saw many beautiful places in just four days and this time was full of experience for me.

Back in Belfast I also travelled a lot around since me and the other Erasmus students wanted to explore as much as possible from our temporary home. The most famous sight in Northern Ireland is probably the Giant´s
Causeway. Since I heard about its myth in advance and saw some pictures of the beautiful sceneries around the Causeway, it was one of the first journeys me and my new Erasmus friends did together. The bus trip is one of the best I ever had because the bus takes the coastal route along the east coast and passes various beautiful sceneries. The Giant’s Causeway itself is terrific and it is unbelievable how nature can build about 40,000 stones all in a similar shape (or was it rather Finn McCool who tried to build a way to Scotland?).

The landscape surrounding the Causeway is unique and small paths allow the visitors to walk on the cliffs for miles and watch down on the million year old stones of the Causeway. Since we were really lucky with the weather this trip was my favourite during the stay in Northern Ireland and unforgettable for me. Do not forget water resistant shoes and warm clothes – it is always pretty windy at the coast!

Just to mention a few other trips we did together we went to the Cave Hill, to Carrickfergus, Larne, Derry, Dublin, Edinburgh and a lot of times we explored the city of Belfast. Belfast is probably not a pretty city but it offers a lot of nice places to visit as the Botanic Garden, the Riverside and the City Hall.
Social Programme

I think no ERASMUS student in Belfast has any problems keeping him- or herself busy. The city offers a lot of possibilities of pubs, clubs, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, galleries, churches, leisure centres, a bowling centre and lots more. Especially the area around the Queen´s University (the Queen´s Quarter) is filled with pubs which are interesting for younger people and students can find a lot of pubs and clubs in a row. Since the pubs in this area resemble a lot other European pubs and did not seem to be typical Irish, we were really glad about the Historical Pub Tour the College offered one evening.

Together with Brieges and a tour guide we went on a trip visiting about seven traditional pubs to gain an insight into the Irish culture. Some of the pubs offer live music on several days a week and most of them also serve food during the day. Whereas The Crown opposite the Europa Hotel is probably the most beautiful and well known pub in town, I liked The Kelly´ s the best because of its traditional and cosy atmosphere. After this pub tour we visited The Kelly´ s more often and on some evenings we were lucky enough to listen to spontaneous life music performed by other visitors.

Since I noticed the excitement regarding Halloween I was really looking forward to this specific kind of party where everybody should dress up. Already two weeks before Halloween we could hear fireworks every evening.
Unfortunately I was sick on this night so I could not join my fellow students to the big party in the Odessey, but they told me it was a lot of fun.

As we lived pretty far from the city centre in the near of St.Mary´s, we did not go out too often. Instead of paying money for a taxi to the city and spending lots more in an expensive pub we often preferred to stay at one of the houses to have a party all together. Especially in the second semester it was a lot of fun because we were about 50 ERASMUS students. One of the parties organised by the Spanish people was a theme party where everybody had to dress up like living during the 70s. This party was a lot of fun because everybody took great efforts in dressing up.

In general I noticed a big difference concerning the drinking culture in Ireland as it differs a lot from what the most of the Erasmus students were used to. While we drink some alcohol at Parties to have fun, Irish students and other young people seem to drink a lot of alcohol to get very drunk.
Guidelines for future students

It is rather difficult to give advices since every student abroad should experience life in a foreign country on his or her own. Nevertheless I tried to find the most important things to know in advance before coming to Belfast.

DO

- Bring an adapter for the plugs. They are more expensive in Belfast.
- Buy a sim-card for your mobile in Belfast. It is cheaper than using a foreign sim-card (MobileWorld is 9p per minute to landline). Make sure your mobile is not simlocked!
- If you plan to rent a car (the best way to see all the nice spots) you need a credit card, otherwise it is not possible to get one.
- Visit as much as possible from the country. Ireland has the most beautiful coasts and sceneries I have ever seen (especially the west coast)!
- Make a trip to Scotland. It is only about 20 pounds for ferry and bus and Edinburgh is worth 6 hours travelling!
- Make a murals tour (guided or not). They tell a lot of the history and reflect the division of the city.
- If you smoke, bring a lot of cigarettes and tell all your visitors to bring more because one packet is more than 7 EUR!
- Save a lot of money or try to find a job on-site. Northern Ireland is much more expensive than you expect before, especially if you intend to travel a lot.
DON´T...

...choose to stay in a house with people you know from your country, it makes it more difficult to improve your language skills and it is very interesting to learn about different cultures.

...expect TV, internet or radio in the houses – the most of them are quite simple and sometimes in a bad condition.

...forget to send in your police record in advance if you chose to do the school based work.

...miss the chance to learn the basics of the Irish language! Just ask the students from the Student´s Union, they can organise a teacher for you.

...forget your slippers or very warm socks. The houses are badly insulated and the floors always cold!

...forget an umbrella!

The Cliifs of Moher in the rain
Overall reflection

The last four months were probably the most important experience I could ever get and I appreciate the opportunity taking part in ERASMUS a lot. I lived together with five other people from four different nationalities and I think there is no better way to experience culture. Apart from my roommates I met people from even more foreign countries and we experienced nearly everything together, including great, enjoyable and funny situations as well as sad moments. The things I learned during my stay in Belfast, the stories I heard and the people I met will influence the rest of my life since it opened my mind a lot. You can read everything about another country, about their political or social problems but knowing people from that specific place and listening to their stories gives a lot more than just information and reflects the ideas and opinions of individuals. This way of learning is much more effective than reading a book or a newspaper since you exchange ideas and broaden your horizons by communicating with people from other nationalities and feel emotionally involved. For this reason Belfast was a really good choice as this country and especially this city is full with history. The problematic past is still tangible and while visiting the city with its divided quarters one can even grasp the complexity of the conflict. Although this is in no case a positive aspect, still it makes the place interesting and unique.
I am also glad that I chose St. Mary’s for studying abroad since I felt good from the very beginning because of the friendly atmosphere. The staff and the students were both very helpful and came to our aid with any problems we were concerned with. Especially Briege was always supportive in any way and I really appreciate her work a lot.