Reflective Journal

ERASMUS WINTER-SPING 2007/2008

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Preface

When my decision to go to Belfast for my semester abroad was made I was full of excitement and at the same time full of questions. What am I going to encounter? What will this Belfast and the people there be like? How will St. Mary’s be and will I be able to follow the classes? Will I be able to adjust to the different way of life and how will my flatmates be? With all this questions in mind but also full of high expectations I left Germany.

Now looking back at my experience here in Belfast I am able to say that all of my questions were answered in a positive way and I got a lot of new experiences and with this reflective journal I am going to recall the most important parts of my time here in Belfast in order to show how I gained all this new experience and insights which made my time here in Belfast one of the best times in my life.

1. Academic Study

Before I came to Belfast I received a booklet including the modules which were recommended to us as Erasmus student or which were designed only for us like Irish Film studies. We were asked to choose some of these modules and to arrange our timetable and as I mentioned before I was wondering if I was really able to follow the classes. In the first term I decided to take Anglo-Irish Literature, Divided Societies, Varieties of Cultural Expression in Europe, Irish Film studies, European Integration and School Experience.

1.1. Anglo-Irish Literature (L. D’Agostino)

Anglo-Irish Literature gave us an overview on Anglo-Irish poets and their writing and at some point also a deeper insight into their most important works. The module was held by three lecturers from which the first one was Mr. Leo D’Agostino, the main part of the module was held by Mr. Brian Hanratty and the third was Mrs. Madeleine Lombard.

1.2 Divided Societies (M. Keane)

In divided societies Mrs. Keane introduced the words nation, nationalism, and ethnicity to us and we discussed what it means if a society is divided. She gave us a lot of examples like the divide of Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics which was of course the most obvious one, but we also talked about the divide in other countries.

Parallel to the classes we had an online group work to do which gave us the opportunity to discuss the meaning of nation, nationalism, and ethnicity with students from our class and also with students form the U.S. and from Barcelona. Both the classes and the online-
discussions provided an new insights and showed me other points of view which encouraged me to re-think my own opinions for which I am very grateful because I think it made me more open-minded to other opinions.

1.3 Varieties of Cultural Expression in Europe (A. Vaupel)
This module was split into two parts. The first part was about European national cinema as an art form and we encountered the several national cinemas like German, Italian and Irish Cinema. Additionally we saw movies which were examples for the different national cinemas and styles. This part of the module was a real eye-opener for me, as it showed me that movies should not only entertain but also educate. The result is that I now have a completely different perception of the European cinemas.
The second part was about European painters and their works which was also interesting and gave me an insight into art which I didn’t have before.

1.4 Irish Film studies (Paul Anthony)
Irish Film studies was supposed to be a weekly course over 10 weeks that gives us an insight into Ireland, its landscape its culture, its history, and its myths. We saw a variety of films starting with “Darby O’Gill and the Little People” which was about Irish Mythology. We saw a movie about Michael Collins and a movie about the bomb of Omagh. I really enjoyed each of those movies especially the more serious movies about the Troubles and about Ireland’s recent history giving me a deeper insight into the events. I also had to realize how small my knowledge about Ireland and its history was.

1.5 European Integration
This course was for two hours at two days and dealt with the development of the European Union from its very beginning and the process of integration in Europe. We talk about the initial ideas that lead to the EU and about the necessities of European integration. At the second day of the course we talked about the influences the EU had on solving the problems in Ireland. European Integration was from my point of view the most interesting class and it is really a pity that it was only for four hours.

1.6 School Experience
I had my school experience at St. Claire’s Primary School and my class was the P7b. I joined the class directly after the 11+ examinations. Over the time I had to realize how different the classroom behaviour in Northern Ireland is in contrast to Germany. The pupils were very loud all the time and it didn’t matter what the teacher said and how loud she shouted at them,
which she constantly did, the pupils were not able to remain silent for more then four or five minutes. I also was astonished about the things the pupils learned in that time. While in Germany the pupils at the age of ten are studying their first foreign language for 2 years and maybe start with a second one and learn the basics of fractions and calculation of percentage in maths the pupils in that class did some practice in dividing through 10, 100 and 1000 and quiet a lot of them had difficulties to read in their own language. So I got a lot of new experiences there and all in all I enjoyed my time at St. Claire’s Primary School even if it was sometimes really challenging.

2. Cultural Program

In the course of my stay here in Belfast we did quiet a lot of cultural activities.

2.1 Cave Hill and Belfast Castle

Our first trip was our trip to Belfast Castle and Cave Hill. We were split into two groups and then the groups went the school’s bus to the parking lot at Belfast Castle, where the trip started. Unfortunately the weather was really bad that day and we all got soaking wet. Nevertheless I really enjoyed that trip and we got a nice view from Belfast and plenty of opportunities to take nice pictures. I and some others enjoyed that trip so much that we did it again one Sunday and that day the weather was a lot better.

2.2 Giant’s Causeway and Old Bushmills Distillery

Our trip to Giant’s Causeway and to Old Bushmills Distillery was my favourite trip. We drove with the coach along the coast to Giant’s Causeway. The weather was very nice and we had a lot to see. At Giant’s Causeway we took the round-trip so that we first saw all of it from above and then we went down to have a closer look and it was just amazing. I have never seen something like that and it was just beautiful.

After leaving Giant’s Causeway we drove to Old Bushmills Distillery. For me, as I really love whisky, this was also very interesting and the whisky after the guided tour through the distillery was just the perfect finishing of a very nice tour.
2.3 Guinness

One day I made a trip to Dublin to visit one of my friends, who was studying there and we decided to visit the Guinness brewery. It was really interesting and it is worth going there even if it is a bit expensive.

2.4 Road Trip

With eight Erasmus students and two cars we had a one weekend road trip to the west coast of Ireland. We spent two nights in hostels which were not very expensive and we saw a lot of Ireland while we were driving. We drove at least 650 miles that weekend. We went to Galway, the Cliffs of Moher, the Burren and we were in Trim. I really have to say that Galway is one of the cities everybody must visit when he is in Ireland because it is just so beautiful. The Cliffs of Moher are also amazing. Unfortunately it was very windy and therefore really cold.

3. Social Program

3.1 Indoor Soccer

Every Wednesday and every Friday we played football in the sports hall with some of the St. Mary’s staff and from time to time some of the Irish students joined us. So we always had changing numbers of players varying from four to twelve. It was always good fun.

3.2 Going out

There was no day in the week where we hadn’t had the opportunity of going out somewhere so as a matter of fact there were weeks where we went out six nights. Some places where we went regularly are the Bot, the Box, the Limelight, Robinson’s, Kelly’s Cellar and of course our second living room the Beehive. We watched every possible Champion’s League, Premier League und cup match there and we were there many Tuesdays, when one of the St. Mary’s societies organized a party there or just for Karaoke. One of the best parties there were the two St. Mary’s Unplugged parties where students from St. Mary’s performed all the songs.
3.3 Quizzes and Eurovision Song Contest
The social events which were organized for the Erasmus students were always good fun especially the quizzes were very nice. The most remarkable fact about the Eurovision Song Contest is that we were better than the Dutch which I personally found hilarious.

4. Guidelines for future Students
For a successful Erasmus experience there are several things which every Erasmus student who is coming to Belfast should take into consideration. There are things you should do and some you should avoid. It is very important to keep in mind that you are not at home anymore and that there will be many things that are different.

Do:
- Be open-minded and accept that things are different in a different country. Try to adjust, even if it is hard sometimes. That is the key for an unforgettable experience.
- It is the same with your fellow Erasmus students. They come from different cultural backgrounds and have therefore different points of view. You should accept and respect this.
- You should be aware of the lower standard of your houses. It is how it is.
- Make sure that you have your landlord’s number in case something in the house has to be fixed, for example the heating.
- Make sure that you have a good relationship to your landlord, which will make everything easier for you.
- Keep always an eye on your heating oil, if you run out of oil it will take up to three days to get new oil and it can become very cold in the houses.
- You should get an UK sim card for your mobile, because it is cheaper than using your own. When you chose O2 you get 300 free SMS.
- If there are parties which are organized from St. Mary’s students go there, because it’s always a good chance to get to know the Irish students
- If you want to go out, ask at the students union or just some of the Irish students, if they know which pub or night club have students nights and on which days
- When you come to Belfast bring something with you that is typical for your home country as a welcome present for your house mates. That will be a good start for the time you are going to spend together in the house
Don’t:

- You should avoid living together with students who speak the same language as you. You are in Belfast to improve your English.
- Never walk home alone in the night or let girls walk home alone in the dark. Stay in large groups or even better take a cab. Everybody should be able to spend 1 GBP or 1.50 GBP for safe way home.
- When you are in a pub avoid talking about things which you don’t really know
- Don’t try to do everything like at home. It’s one part of the Erasmus experience to try something new and gain new perspectives and insights.
- Don’t forget formal clothes for the school experience. Most of the schools expect formal clothes.

5. Overall Reflection

As I stated in the preface I was full of questions and expectations when I left Germany to study and to live in Belfast. I didn’t know much about Belfast and about Northern Ireland and Ireland as a whole, but I always wanted to go there. My semester abroad gave me this opportunity and I have never regretted this decision.

Now I am in my last two weeks of my semester abroad and I can not believe how fast the time here went by. I had a great time in Belfast with all the other Erasmus students and with the Irish students as well. It is not only that I made a lot of new friends from different countries furthermore living together with them and spending time with them gave my the chance to get used to other ways of living and points of view. That was not always easy and sometimes it could be quiet challenging especially when I was confronted with the prejudices students from other nations have about my country and fellow countrymen. Quiet often we had serious discussion on different prejudices and also on the situations in the different countries. All these discussions contributed to what I see as a main part of the Erasmus experience. They helped gaining a better understanding of the people beyond the border of my own country.

What I also realized is that of course everybody has his national pride, but that there is no superior or inferior country or culture, there are only different countries with different ways of life and for a united Europe we need to accept that. Often there are rivalries between different countries and these rivalries are most fierce between neighbours like for example the Netherlands and Belgium.

The other part of the Erasmus experience is to make a living in another country and on your own. To me It is not to the same extend as it is for many of the other Erasmus students which
live away from their parent’s house for the first time, but nevertheless it is living in another country and therefore out of the well know surrounding. That required a good deal of adjustment but it also offered a unique chance to try new things and although it was hard for me in the beginning but I don’t want to miss this experience anymore.

So my time on the Erasmus program helped me to extend my horizon. Furthermore I gained a lot of new experiences which made a different person out of me because I think that every new experience or insight helps a person to develop and improve.

I think I will not only benefit from that in everyday life furthermore it will help me later in my job as a teacher when I have to prepare my students for their lives in a united Europe and in a globalized world.

So all in all I have to say that I have profited in many ways from the Erasmus experience. I have improved my English, found new friends and I was allowed to make many new experiences which I would never have made without the Erasmus experience. On my point of view everyone who has the opportunity to go on a semester abroad should take this chance for an unforgettable time in his or her life.