Reflective Journal
International outreach Assignment
Paul Anthony

Ans Willems - Belgium
Section A

Academic study

New country, new people, new school and another way of teaching! The first things that I noticed was that the teachers are very helpful here. When you have a question, just ask it and somebody will help you with pleasure. A problem of the student will immediately become a problem of the teacher. In Belgium teachers are more dissociated from the students than here. Sometimes that is a good thing, but most of the time it brings a negative vibe in the classroom. You can call it a one-man show! One man is talking and the rest of the students just have to sit back and listen to what the teacher has to say. When class is over the teacher disappears in the staff room and you have to make an appointment to speak with him again. Here in St. Mary’s that is all different in a positive way. When you want help, a lot of people want to help you.

Another thing that is very different in Belgium is the way of giving grades. In my home country you have to do two exams for every course, one in January and one in June. This is all very theoretical, you get one week to study and then you have 3 weeks of doing exams. In St.-Mary’s you get more the chance to prove yourself in writing essays and making school tasks. There is also more interest for the visual aspect than in Belgium.

The last thing that is very weird for us is that students just can go to class when they feel like going. And when you are in the classroom, you can eat or drink whatever you want. You can even leave whenever you want. In Belgium you have to be present. When you are not there, you have to be able to prove that you where sick or that you had another good reason for not going to class. A lot of teachers count the times that you weren’t in their class and when you can’t prove that you were legally absent, they can fail you on your exams.

Studying in another school can open your eyes and let you see things that you’ve never seen before. When we want to improve the European system of teaching, we have to work together. If we do that, we can learn a lot of each other and become better teachers, teachers who want to improve and want to be there for the student’s sake.

Section B

Cultural programme

The first weekend that I was here, I got to know a lot of fantastic new people. They were open, kind; social ... They asked me if I would like to go to Scotland with them. And so I did! The first weekend of February we took a boat to the other side of the sea. We went to Glasgow, stayed there for one night in a hostel, travelled to Edinburgh but in the mean time we stopped in a little village called Linlithgow. There we discovered the Linlithgow Palace. It was a relic of a
very old palace. Then we arrived in Edinburgh. This is the most beautiful and historical city I’ve ever seen. During the day we took a chance on a free day tour with a very cute guide. His stories where fantastic and he kept his audience chained to his lips. We learned a lot about the city thanks to this man. He was so good that we even paid 8£ to see him on his ghost tour. Some of us couldn’t get enough of Scotland and are going back to see the Highlands and especially red cows.

Two weeks ago two girls convinced me to go to Derry with them on a Saturday morning. First I didn’t think it was a good idea, because on Friday we go out. But they kept nagging until I said ‘Yes’. I was lucky that we had to sit in a bus for 1.5 hours because I could use the few hours of extra sleep. When we arrived we started slandering through the city and over the city wall. We took a lot of pictures but because we weren’t very fit, we didn’t do a lot except tasting food and drinking an Irish coffee. After a few hours slandering we decided to go home, eat some more, sit back in the sofa and watch our favorite soap. What a day!

Last weekend a few friends from Belgium came over and because we didn’t want to take them to the city centre again, we decided to take them to Cave hill. We had never been there ourselves, we tried 5 times to get there but because we always wanted to go during the weekend, a hangover was the main reason why we never went before. It was a very nice day, the weather was good and everybody was in a good mood. We started walking to the castle and a few people started nagging, we walked up to the cave and another person started complaining. That person took a seat on a rock and stopped walking. The rest of the group walked up to the cave, took a few beautiful pictures and went back down to the castle to drink something and eat a lovely muffin.

I’m only here for a month and a half and I already had the time of my life! That is only good news for the other month and a half, because it is only getting better and better!
Section C
Social programme

The one thing that I noticed immediately was the pub culture. When you enter a pub everybody is so friendly and starts talking to you. In Belgium people are more discrete. Don't get me wrong, if you go to a pub in Belgium people will also be friendly but not in the way they are here. And when I'm talking about friendly people, I'm not only talking about the people you run into in a pub but also the people you meet during doing the normal daily stuff. For example the teachers you meet during teaching practice. Those people were so kind and friendly, unbelievable! When I have to do teaching practice in Belgium I'm always more nervous for the teachers than for the students. Coordinators can be so mean. It is horrible when you have to be in a school for 5 weeks when you don't like the people around you. Luckily it was not like in Belgium here.

Earlier I was talking about the pubs. One big difference with Belgium and that I like more about Belgium is that the pubs close at 3 o'clock at night and the clubs at 6 o'clock in the morning. When a pub closes here at 1 o'clock at night I don't want to go home yet. But that is maybe because I'm used to go out until the early morning. And then a huge privilege that I'm jealous of are the taxis! In Belgium I never took a cab before because you don't have them in our neighbourhood and if you can find one it is very expensive. So when I'm back in Belgium I have to get used again to riding my bike.

Section D
Guidelines for future student

First of all I'm going to tell students that they should look really carefully for a cheap flight! Then I would tell to them about the heating. Some students use the heating a lot or they are used to put on the heating all day and whenever they are cold. When you arrive here the weather can be very cold, especially at night. A good advice is then to put something extra on or use an extra blanket and not to put on the heating, because it is very expensive. Good rules about when you put the heating on and when not, is also a great tip that I can suggest to you.
Now something totally different is the pub culture. I would recommend everybody to enjoy themselves in the several pubs in Belfast. A great thing to do is to enjoy the pub tour and when you know your way around the pubs, you can go on your own and with your own friends. But then you know which pubs you really have to visit during your stay in Belfast. When you are partying a lot sometimes you forget about school and you get behind with all your schoolwork. So I would like to say: “Don’t underestimate your schoolwork during your experience abroad!!!”

The last thing that I would like to recommend is travelling!!! You are in Belfast once! So enjoy your time here and visit a lot of things, go on day tours, go to Scotland... But don’t forget the thing you can do here like Cave Hill, Black Mountain, Titanic... All places you can go and have a great time, especially Cave Hill. When you are born in the countryside and you have to live for three months in the city that is a big change! So if you want to escape from the big city life just take a bus and take a walk on Cave Hill. It is beautiful up there and it reminds you of all the nature you can find at home.

Section E
Overall reflection on the experience

When I was at the airport I thought by myself: “What did I put myself into?” I had to say goodbye to everybody, leaving everything behind and go to a place that is totally unknown. I also had to communicate with people in a language that I wasn’t so good at. But I got on the plain and took a chance on the unknown. When I arrived two lovely Spanish girls were waiting for me. They showed me the house and also the shops that I might need the first day. When the weeks were passing by I found my way around the school, the city and the language was definitely improving. I could express myself more in a group with people and I didn’t feel nervous about it. Everybody is struggling a bit with the language but everybody tries their best and is giving a chance to people where they never would talk to on the street. That is the best thing about going on Erasmus... You get to know people all over the world, who you normally never
would be in contact with. All kind of people with a different languages, different cultures, different characters... And that is the challenge! Can you cope in a situation like that? Not to mention you are far far far away from home.

You get to know a lot of new people. With some you can build a real friendship. I think friendships like this are going to stand for al long time. You get to know them in another way than you get to know your friends from home. These friendships are going to take a lot of effort to keep them standing, but I think it is word all the effort and knowing you have friends all over the world is the best feeling I’ve ever had.

In Belgium I live with my parents. Every morning I take the train to school and every evening when I come home my mother has cooked for my and did my laundry, THANKS MUMMY! This was the ultimate opportunity to go out and to take care of myself. In the beginning it was a bit scary because I never did any laundry before, but until now everything has come out of the washing machine in its original shape and colour. So, that deserves a bit of respect.

At home I cook sometimes, but only when I feel like it and if I could make a dish that I really like to eat. After making one dish I’m done. I do the dishes with my brother and the rest of the week my mum cooks again. During the months that I had to cook for myself, I realized what my mum was going true every day. When I come home I think I’m going to be more helpful with a lot of things and not only the things that involves the kitchen.

Going abroad thought me really how to take care for myself and I didn’t had to do it all on my own. Your housemates help you a lot, when you are struggling with the laundry are fixing something in the house. The thing that took me the most by surprise was responsibility. When I’m at home I do my thing and that’s it. But here you have the responsibility of your house, your money, your schoolwork and the most important thing: each other. When all kinds of different people get dropped together in a group, a lot of things are going on. The main thing that I learned here is not how to take care of myself but certainly how to take care for each other. And that is something that I can be really proud of... Thanks Erasmus!!!