**IEREST**

**Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers**

**Module 3 - Activity 2**

**One, two, many… Erasmus experiences**

1. **Introduction**

This activity invites the students to look back critically on how they talk about their Erasmus experience with other people once they have returned home. As other narrators, students will tend to construct different narratives for different audiences: they select what to tell, and how to tell it, according to whether they are talking with another mobile friend, a parent, a girl/boyfriend, a friend who did not go abroad, a tutor from the home university, etc. This does not imply, however, that one ‘version’ of an episode is more or less ‘true’ than another.

This activity is founded on an idea of interculturality as the co-construction of meaning among the narrators and recipients of narratives, as both parties are actively engaged in giving meaning to the narratives. The meeting between the Erasmus student and the possible recipients of her or his narratives is an intercultural encounter, according to a non-essentialist paradigm of diversities; it requires students to negotiate meaning when communicating with others, accept different world views, and adapt their communication styles to those of others. This can help returning Erasmus students to deal with their possible sense of discomfort at not being understood/listened to by others. Moreover, becoming aware of the intercultural richness of their narratives can help students become more responsible mediators of the Erasmus experience for the benefit of others.

The students are asked to reflect on these issues through the use of autoethnography, a combination of autobiography and ethnography.

The estimated overall time for completing the activity is 10 hours.

1. **Learning objectives and outcomes**

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|  | **Learning objectives**  This activity aims to enable students to: | **Learning outcomes**  Learners will be able to: |
| **3** | Become aware that interlocutors are active producers and receivers of meanings (e.g., through the narratives they tell). | Monitor how they convey their meanings to others, taking into account that interlocutors are active producers of meanings. |
| **4** | Develop the ability to name, critically question and explain to others their Erasmus intercultural experiences. | Name, critically question and explore ways to explain to others their Erasmus intercultural experiences. |
| **5** | Develop an awareness of the importance of monitoring their own language to avoid perpetuating culturalist discourses. | Use their own language in a way that avoids perpetuating culturalist discourses. |
| **6** | Develop a sense of responsibility towards future mobile students as recipients of one’s narratives. | Act upon a sense of responsibility towards future mobile students and reflect on their own Erasmus stories accordingly. |

1. **Overview and description of tasks**

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| --- | --- |
| ***Task 1.***  **I remember…** | * Ask the students to bring to class documents they produced during their Erasmus experience and talk about them. * Invite the students to reflect on who such documents were directed to and how the addressees influenced their stories. Take notes on the board during the discussion. * Introduce autobiography with the help of *Attachment 1.* * Ask the students to write about two times when they spoke about their Erasmus experience with different people. |
| ***Task 2.***  **Who did you tell?...** | * Invite the students to share and discuss their autobiographical texts in small groups with the help of *Attachment 2.* * Initiate a class discussion based on the answers, introducing the concept of ‘social representations’. |
| ***Task 3.***  **Remember when I told you…?** | * Help the students prepare a set of questions to interview two ‘recipients’ of their stories (i.e. people to whom they recounted episodes of their Erasmus experience). * Ask the students to conduct their interviews and take notes, using the guidelines in *Attachment 3*. |
| ***Task 4.***  **Your meaning/my meaning** | * In small groups, the students compare their notes from *Task 2* and *Task 3* (*Attachment 4*), and reflect on the difficulty of communicating their experience to others. * The discussion continues in plenary. |
| ***Task 5.***  **Sharing experiences with future Erasmus students** | * Review what the students have learned so far. * In plenary, the students discuss what they wish they had known before their departure. * Individually, the students write a blog post about their study abroad aimed at helping future Erasmus students prepare better for their experience. * Ask students to read their blog posts to the class. * Create a blog. Then ask the students to publish their posts on it. * Invite the students to self-assess their blog posts according to *Attachment 5*. |

***Task 1. I remember…***

Time required: 3 hours

*Task overview: In this task, students bring to class various documents they produced while abroad (pictures, e-mails, diary entries, etc.) and learn to see how the (intended) addressee may have influenced the tone and content of such documents. Then, as input for task 2, they write up episodes during which they communicated some of their Erasmus experiences to others upon return.*

1. Before the class, inform the students that they have to bring to class some documents from their Erasmus experience: photos, e-mails, blog posts, social media postings, etc. At the start of the class, invite the students to tell each other about the documents that they have brought to class. While they tell their stories, the focus of the discussion is initially on the *what* and the *how* of the stories. The following questions can be offered as a starting point:

* How do you feel when you look at these documents?
* What were your feelings at the time?
* What did you like/dislike?
* What didn’t you know yet?

1. Progressively, move the focus of the discussions to the ‘recipient’ of their stories, the *to whom.* In other words, the students should discuss how they recounted their Erasmus experience (in terms of the topics, episodes, feelings, meetings, settings, etc.) to, for example:
   * A friend who did their study abroad in a different destination.
   * A friend who didn’t take part in the Erasmus programme.
   * Their partner.
   * An older family member.
   * A teacher.
   * Etc.

While the students are telling their stories, take note of similarities and differences in stories on the board, highlighting them by filling in a table where each column corresponds to a different category of recipients (family members, non-mobile friends, etc.). The aim is not to build a coherent picture but to make variations visible and thus analysable. The variations between the stories told to different recipients can be due to differences in the personal relationship between the ‘narrator’ and the ‘recipient’ of the story, but also to how specific social relations are perceived by the ‘narrators’ and generally by the wider society. In other words, what (and how) students choose to narrate can be affected by their idea of what ‘a parent’, ‘a teacher’ or ‘a friend’ wants to hear.

1. Introduce the concept of ‘autobiography writing’, including instructions such as those provided in *Attachment 1* (see also *Slides 85-89*).
2. Ask the students to write about two times when they spoke about their Erasmus experience with different people. If students accomplish this task out-of-class, ask them to submit their autobiographical texts to you a few days before the next lesson, so that you can get an idea of the kinds of episodes they recalled, and if necessary make reference to their texts during *Task 2*.

***Task 2. Who did you tell?...***

Time required: 1.5 hours

*Task overview: In this task, students share personal written accounts on how they presented their experiences abroad to different people. They discuss and compare their accounts in small groups in a structured way. This exercise prepares them to acquire a deeper understanding of social representations and the way they feature in personal narratives.*

1. Having written their autobiographical texts, students compare them in groups of three, using the prompts provided in the form (*Attachment 2*) as guidelines for discussion. Ask them to take notes during the discussion. In particular, in the form they are asked to reflect on the episodes they were recounting and emotions they were trying to convey to their different interlocutors, as well as on the interlocutors’ reactions.
2. Towards the end, the form in *Attachment 2* asks students to reflect on the social representations that may lie behind the way we adapt our stories to different interlocutors. Thus, in plenary, introduce the notion of ‘social representation’ (see also *Slides 90-93*). Make students aware of how a common practice in conversation is to select topics and episodes that we assume are of interest to our interlocutors (e.g., sports facilities in the host university if our interlocutor is interested in sport). However, the fact that we address or avoid topics is also linked to broader social conventions (for example, we may be more likely to choose a friend than a parent as the recipient of a story about a romantic experience; and when both friends and parents are told about romantic stories abroad, they will probably be offered different versions of the story, different emotions, tone, language choices, etc.). Students are invited to reflect on this, bearing in mind that personal experiences may be different (for some students, for example, their relationship with their parents may be such that they will speaking about romantic experiences as they would with their friends).

***Task 3. Remember when I told you…?***

Time required: 2 hours

*Task overview: In this task, students prepare to conduct an interview with two people (e.g., family members, friends, professors) to whom they recounted episodes of their Erasmus experience. The aim is for them to experience how different interpretations can derive from the same story.*

1. Introduce the main objective of this task to the students: so far they have focused on how they shape their narratives according to their interlocutors, but here they will analyse how the ‘recipients’ of the stories themselves interpret these.
2. The students are therefore invited to prepare an interview with two different people to whom they recounted episodes of their Erasmus experience. The interviews can be with:

* A family member.
* A friend (female/male, Erasmus/non-Erasmus).
* Their partner.
* A teacher.
* Anyone they had contact with for professional/bureaucratic/academic reasons during their Erasmus period (Erasmus tutor, helpdesk staff, employer, etc.).

Help the students prepare the interview questions in class. Some questions should be the same as those used in the discussion in the previous task (*Attachment 2*), so as to have a direct comparison between their own point of view and that of their interlocutors. The following questions could also be used:

* What episodes do you remember me telling you? Were any of these episodes about a moment you perceived as having had a significant impact on me?
* What emotions did I convey?
* What tone did I use?
* Do you think that the stories I told you say something about how the Erasmus period is perceived in society?
* Did you see any changes in me once I returned from my Erasmus experience? Did I tell you about these changes?
* What were your thoughts and feelings when I was telling you about my experience abroad?

1. Ask the students to conduct their interview for homework (instructions on how to conduct an interview are provided in *Attachment 3*). If the interviews cannot be done face-to-face because the interviewee lives elsewhere, online interviews are also possible (e.g., by means of *Skype*). Tell students to take notes during the interviews and/or to (video-)record them. In this case, warn the students to ensure the people they interview give them consent to use their video-recordings to show in class. Ask students to send their interview notes to you before the following class, so that you can familiarise yourself with the episodes told and be able to refer to them in the next task.

***Task 4. Your meaning/my meaning***

Time required: 1.5 hours

*Task overview: In this task, students explore the differences between their own intended meanings when narrating their Erasmus experiences and the meanings that their recipients attribute to such narrations, by comparing the outputs of Tasks 2 and 3.*

1. In class, the students discuss their interviews in small groups, on the basis of their interview notes and of the grid provided in *Attachment 4*. The grid asks themto work on narratives comparing their point of view as narrators (*Task 2* and *Attachment 2*) with the recipients’ perspectives (*Task 3*). The main objective of this analysis is to reflect on the difficulty of communicating our experience to others and to accept that others may not understand us for a variety of reasons. Moving around the groups, support the students in their analysis, pointing at how an episode can be interpreted in many ways, depending on the interlocutors and the different time/context variables.
2. In plenary, ask the groups to report on their analysis: what have they learnt from comparing their own points of view (their biography entries, *Task 2*) with that of the others (ethnographic interviews, *Task 3*)? What similarities/differences have emerged from their reflections within their groups?

***Task 5. Sharing experiences with future Erasmus students***

Time required: 2 hours

*Task overview: In this task, students recall what they would have liked to learn about the Erasmus experience before departure. Drawing on this, they write a class blog meant for future Erasmus students. In doing so, they must bear in mind what they learnt in the previous tasks about the possible difference between their communicative intentions as writers and the readers’ interpretations of their words.*

1. Introduce the main objective of this task to the students, summarizing the steps undertaken so far: students have worked on (1) how individuals narrate their experiences to friends/relatives in order to convey an idea of themselves and their personal experiences, and (2) the recipients’ interpretations may be different from what the individual wished to convey. This new task turns to how students can take advantage of their (new) awareness, to act as mediators of their experience for the benefit of future Erasmus students.
2. In plenary, invite students to think back to when they were preparing for their Erasmus experience. Use the following questions to guide them:

* When you were preparing for your stay abroad, what did you read? Institutional websites? Other Erasmus websites/blogs etc.? Did you watch videos about Erasmus experiences? Did you speak with former Erasmus students? Briefly, what kind of information/impressions/reflections/images did you get?
* Was anything missing? Some students mentioned the fact that it’s difficult to find testimonies of the difficulties/anxieties typical of the pre-departure and initial phase of the Erasmus sojourn. Did you have the same impression?
* Is there anything you would have liked to find/be told that you didn’t find/weren’t told?

1. Ask students individually to write a post for a class blog aimed at helping future Erasmus students prepare better for their experience. Remind students to bear in mind what they learnt in the previous task about multiple interpretations of narratives, as well as the following points:

* Your readers are not necessarily going to the same institution/city/country. Thus there is no point in focusing on the ‘habits’ of those living in a specific place or giving practical information (opening times of offices, details about specific student residences, best discos in town, etc.).
* Be personal: avoid generalisations about experience (in other words, just because you had a bad experience in a student residence doesn’t mean everybody will), and speak for yourself (not in the name of Erasmus students, specific national groups, etc.).
* Bear in mind what you learnt in the previous tasks: you have no control over how your writings may be interpreted by recipients, nor will you know what effect your words have on how your readers will tackle their own personal Erasmus experience.
* Avoid the dos and don’ts type of advice. Rather, reflect on what kind of information/ideas/reflections you would have liked to read about before your own departure.

If needed, introduce some supporting theoretical concepts, such as ‘essentialism’ (*Slides 10-17*), ‘stereotyping’ (*Slides 18-21*), and ‘narratives’ (*Slides 36-41*). Decide whether you want to ask groups to focus on different topics (e.g., friends and social contacts, academic experiences, etc.) in order to help them decide what to write. In any case, give them a 30-minute time limit to write a digital document, on a computer/portable device.

1. Ask students to read their blog posts to the class. The other students have the responsibility to check that the guidelines provided for posts have been respected and suggest possible changes.
2. Create a class blog (a good option is *Wordpress.com*) and ask the students to publish their posts. Then encourage the class to share the link to the blog with their contacts (including Erasmus offices in their home institution) in order to make it known to future mobile students.
3. Invite the students to self-assess their blog posts with the support of *Attachment 5*, and to share their reflections with the class.
4. **Assessment methods**

* Self-assessment of the blog posts, using the form (see *Attachment 5*) provided during *Task 5*.
* Teacher assessment of students’ blog posts, using the same form used for self-assessment (*Attachment 5*).

1. **Suggested readings**

* Ellingson, L. L., & Ellis, C. (2008). Autoethnography as constructionist project. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 445-465). New York, NY: Guilford Publications.
* Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *12*(1). Retrieved July 22, 2015, from: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095#g2>.
* Riessman, C. K. (2003). Analysis of personal narratives. In J. A. Holstein & J. Holstein, (Eds.), *Inside interviewing: New lenses, new concerns* (pp. 331-346). London: Sage.

1. **Materials and resources**

* Computers and access to the Internet.
* The IEREST slides.
* Five IEREST attachments:
  + *Attachment 1*: Guidelines for writing an autobiography (*Task 1*).
  + *Attachment 2*: Guidelines for reflecting on autobiographies (*Task 2*).
  + *Attachment 3*: Steps for conducting an interview (*Task 3*).
  + *Attachment 4*: Grid for comparing autobiographies and interviews (*Task 4*).
  + *Attachment 5*: Grid for self-assessing the blog posts (*Task 5*).

**Attachment 1 (*Task 1. I remember…*)**

You have been asked to write extracts of your autobiography, which may feel like a daunting task. Read through the following tips and enjoy the opportunity that writing offers you to reflect on your communication style and your relationships, against the backdrop of your experience abroad.

* *Think back to past experiences connected with you telling other people about your stay abroad, and select the ones which are the most vivid in your memory because, for example, they struck, disappointed, excited or annoyed you.*
* *You may want to write about a single event, or connect different episodes.*
* *The aim of your autobiography is to arouse your readers’ interest, while also considering (with hindsight) how you tend to talk about your Erasmus experience to people and how they react to your stories.*
* *As a strategy to make your writing interesting for others, ensure that you give enough detail for your reader to visualise what you’re describing. For example, you may want to describe people and settings, reflect on your own thoughts and emotions, report conversations as direct speech (dialogues), etc.*
* *Try to focus on the one hand on the facts, and on the other on your interpretations, but feel free to write them as you wish:*
  + *Report on the what and the how of your stories (think also about what you did not tell);*
  + *Report on what your interlocutor said and did, and how they said and did it;*
  + *Recall what you expected from your interlocutor and if those expectations were met.*
* *There is no need to write much: be sincere and take time to reflect. That’s all.*

Adapted from:

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *12*(1). Retrieved July 22, 2015, from: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095#g2>.

**Attachment 2 (*Task 2. Who did you tell?...*)**

Compare your autobiography entries, and take notes on similarities and differences in the episodes you told different people about your Erasmus experience, focussing on:

|  |
| --- |
| You:   1. What **episodes** were you telling your interlocutor(s)? What episode would you never have told them? Were you describing a moment that had a significant impact on you? If so, did you describe the same moment to all your interlocutors? 2. What **people** (of those you met during your Erasmus exchange) did you mention in your story? Who didn’t you talk about? 3. What **emotions** were you trying to convey? What emotions (which you connect with your Erasmus experience) are missing? 4. What **tone** (emotional, informative, ironical, self-ironical, etc.) were you using?   Your interlocutor(s):   1. What were your interlocutors most/least interested in? How did they show their (lack of) interest?   Possible social representations beyond you and your interlocutors:   1. Do the stories you were telling them say something about how you perceived your interlocutors and the relationship you had with them? Do such stories say something of social relationships as recognised by the wider society (e.g., mother-daughter, older generation-younger generation, female friend-male friend, etc.?) 2. Do the stories you were telling them say something about how the Erasmus period is conceived in your society? |

Take notes on your reflections in the table below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Biography entry 1 | Biography entry 2 |
| * Interlocutor(s) * Relationship to with me * When and where (if this applies) |  |  |
| My notes |  |  |

**Attachment 3 (*Task 3. Remember when I told you…?*)**

The main objective of this task is to understand what kind of narrative two different people received from you and how they experienced it. Fill in this form twice (one form for each interviewee); if possible, record your interviews.

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| --- |
| 1. Who are you going to interview? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  * A family member? * A friend (female/male, Erasmus/non-Erasmus)? * Your partner? * A professor? * Someone you had contacts with for professional/bureaucratic/academic reasons during the whole Erasmus (Erasmus tutor, helpdesk staff, employer, etc.)?  1. Take notes of your questions and the answers you receive. Please use the questions prepared in class, but also feel free to ask additional questions if you want. 2. Transcribe (from memory or with the help of the recordings) the parts where, in your opinion, the interviewee is focusing on how s/he interpreted your stories about the Erasmus experience; in other words, on the extracts in which s/he conveys her/his feelings and thoughts about the *what* and the *how* of your narrative. 3. Send your notes (and, if you wish, the recordings) to your teacher. |

**Attachment 4 (*Task 4. Your meaning/my meaning*)**

Compare your narratives and how they were received/understood by your interlocutors.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Questions** | **You** | **Recipient** |
| Episodes told: |  |  |
| Emotions conveyed: |  |  |
| Tone used: |  |  |
| How the Erasmus experience is perceived by society: |  |  |
| Changes after the Erasmus experience: |  |  |
| Thought and feelings when telling /being told about the experience abroad: |  |  |

Did you find major differences?

If so, describe what these differences are and why they occurred, in your opinion.

**Attachment 5 (*Task 5. Sharing experiences with future Erasmus students*)**

This is a self-assessment grid for evaluating your blog post. Read your post again and tick the column which best reflects how you feel about your text, and provide examples of what you did well or could have done better. The aim of this self-assessment is to help you to focus on your learning process.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **In the blog** | **I was able to do this without effort** | **I was partly able to do this** | **I wasn’t able to do this on this occasion** |
| I selected my topic taking into account the possible interests of my audience. |  |  |  |
| I was able to convey my meanings, taking into account that my readers will be active receivers of such meanings. |  |  |  |
| I was careful not to use examples and words that could perpetuate stereotypes. |  |  |  |
| While writing, I was aware of my responsibility towards my readers and tried to write accordingly. |  |  |  |