

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A Circle and a Cross

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This is a very accomplished, well written account of an episode on a train in Morocco. The protagonist finds herself in a compartment with a family of six. She tries to make conversation with one of the children, who is clearly rather interested in this young woman with the strange habit of writing from left to right in her notebook, but the language divide, between Moroccan Arabic and the standard version she has been learning, is just too great. So she hits on the idea of showing him how to play noughts and crosses; and the language barrier is overcome...

I recently spent a few months in Morocco as part of a mobility programme, and as most students do I devoted a fair amount of my free time to travelling and visiting different parts of the country. Having always been very curious, I just couldn't resist the temptation.

Morocco is a rather long-haul country, and one can spend up to five hours – sometimes even more – travelling from one city to another. It was the end of October, and a couple of friends and I decided to go to Tangier before our mid-term break was over. Living in Rabat we knew that it would not be a short journey, but nonetheless we wanted to make the most of those last few days.

We spent four hours on the train, and for the first half hour I updated the journal that I'd been keeping for the last couple of months. Due to studies or other various hurdles I didn't always have the time to fill it in; therefore I resorted to using the time I spent travelling on trains and coaches to make up for the reports I'd missed.

On our railway carriage we came across a somewhat unusual family: the two parents were talking to their four children, none of whom were screaming or trying to talk over them. This is why we perceived them as 'unusual' – Moroccan children are generally rather 'active', to say the least. One of them was a very curious boy. He kept running up and down the aisle, playing with his toy car and sliding it on every seat, probably pretending to be a famous racer. He seemed completely absorbed in his game, and yet he kept me within his sight.

Being used to the Arabic alphabet I could see that he was intrigued by my left-to-right writing, and it wasn't long until he finally decided to perch on the armrest of the empty seat beside me. As his father was keeping an

eye on him – because I was, after all, a perfect stranger – I barely smiled at this curious child, and I went on with my activity as if nothing was happening. He wanted to play with somebody, I could see that. And maybe discover something about this weird young woman with her weird-looking handwriting, who knows.

We tried to talk, but it was no use: he could only speak Moroccan Arabic, a language that I was just barely becoming familiar with. I attempted Standard Arabic: nothing. As a last resort I gave French a shot: still useless. Soon enough he got fed up and went back to speeding with his toy car. He was not satisfied though, and I could tell he wanted to find out more about me. Any communication with him seemed to be beyond reach – but I've always liked a good challenge.

He came back and he sat down next to me with his big brown eyes wide open, clearly waiting for something to happen. I figured he was expecting me to make the first move, and do anything that could entertain him. I looked over to my friend, who was also catching up on her journal, and I asked her whether in her opinion this child knew how to play 'Noughts and Crosses'. I don't know why I thought of that specific game, it was the first thing that came to mind. She dismissed my question with a flick of her hand and a quick shake of the head, as if to state that she had no idea. I decided to give it a shot, and on the last page of my notebook I drew a nine-square grid. I passed the notebook and the pen to the curious boy, who immediately shook his head – I was still a stranger, and a woman too. Nevertheless it was a matter of seconds before he changed his mind, and we started playing. His father was smiling and nodding from a distance, both trusting me and still keeping an eye on his now laughing son. I was enjoying this little game more than I normally would: there I was, bonding with a child I had never seen before over something as simple as that, despite other forms of communication failing. I was having fun, and so was he – as the whole carriage was soon able to tell by all his bursting into laughter.

I do cherish this particular memory, because it goes to show just how resourceful we can be when tackling a problem. There is a sort of pride that arises from the ability to form a connection with a total stranger, more so when there is a substantial cultural difference or when spoken interaction proves to be nearly impossible. In that instance, any bond is considered a success; therefore we were cherishing that small treasure, well aware of its ephemeral nature. He didn't seem to care about his toy car anymore, nor about his family. All his worries seemed to have vanished: apparently I didn't pose too much of a threat, so we kept playing and making the most out of that time together.

It wasn't long until that family had to get off the train, but the father did come up to me and thanked me before leaving. I saw the children waving at me through the window; as the train departed I waved at them,

and so did my friend – who apparently had come to feel involved in this pleasant encounter. I went back to writing my journal, glancing at the landscape every now and then. On the last page, a few nine-square grids that can, to this day, spark my smile.

