

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A night at the library

Fabio Grattoni

LT Economics and Management

Destination: Hull University, UK

This account focuses on a night spent in the library of the university of Hull (where Philip Larkin, possibly the greatest post-war English poet, was librarian from 1955 until his death in 1985). The interest for the reader lies partly in the context, the description of the walk through the lonely streets at night, and the discovery that the library is open at midnight, but especially in the categorization of the students the protagonist finds at work inside: the owl student, the lost student, and the desperate student. Students who read the account may well recognize themselves as belonging to one or another of these categories; the protagonist sees himself as a mixture of the first (owl) and the third (desperate). But helped by a cup of strong coffee he is able to keep working until first light, and complete an essay for which, 'against all the odds', he gets a good mark; a fitting metaphor, he concludes, for his entire Erasmus experience.

I would like to tell you the story of when I spent the night at the university's library. I was in Hull, not far from the deep English countryside but at the same time in a very multicultural port city. I found these two clashing features an intriguing peculiarity. It is a small city, incredibly similar to my city in Italy: Udine. Both rather unknown to the public, a part for their football team that makes you understand football lovers as soon as you mention it. They are the only ones that are aware of the existence of these cities. Both the cities with very kind and proud people, and with an ambitious soul. Hull, in fact, was UK's city of culture that year.

It was the second or third month of my Erasmus experience when I found out that the library was open the whole night. I immediately found it very fascinating. Who stays at the library the entire night? What happens among hundreds of shelves full of thousands of books when everyone else is sleeping? My mind wondered while I was slowly convincing myself that I wanted to try. I needed to know! The fight between my two sides began. The quiet one, that thought that it would have been a decision full of regrets the next day, when I would have been extremely tired. Against the curious and adventurous one, who thought it was an unmissable occasion that I would have regret the next year if I wouldn't have taken it. Needless to say, the latter won.

The occasion arrived when I had to finish an essay for a course I was taking there. Even if it wasn't necessary to spend the night working on it, I thought it was the perfect opportunity. When the moment to leave approached I started to doubt the validity of the idea. The result was the procrastination of the departure until also the last bus had left. The accommodation I was staying at was a little more than one hour walk far from the library. I decided to go anyway even if I could have stayed working there in my room. It was the right decision because the walk was extremely relaxing. When you walk in the middle of the night, alone, it may be scary at times but, if you overcome that fear, you discover a whole new city. The very same streets and buildings change. The street you thought you knew have a completely new intriguing look. It is something I often do also in Venice. I would go, wondering around the smallest streets I could find, trying to discover the few ones where there is no one, and then letting my mind speculate about what those streets, those houses, those canals, would say if they could unravel their mysteries.

After an hour walking I arrived at the library. Against all the odds there were a lot of people studying and writing papers just like me. The first thing I did was to walk around. This gave me the chance to observe the inhabitants of the library at night. There was the one that I named the owl-student. He is only productive at night. For him the morning doesn't exist. He stays up until late at night and wakes up ready for lunch. Then there is the lost student. Probably he goes to the library with the best intentions but ends up surfing the Internet the entire night, finding himself after two hours in a Russian bonsai forum discussing about the best ways to protect the trees from freezing. Only at that moment he understands that is probably time to give up the idea of studying and go to sleep. Finally, there is the desperate student. You can immediately identify him, because he is the one that is constantly scratching his head, sunk below a dozen of books and with one or two energy drinks upon which he desperately stores his hope to remain awake to finish his homework. I was one of the first category, with a little tint of the desperate one. With this brief analysis of the people around me my night began.

The study session started greatly, with most of the work being done in the first few hours. But then something happened. The energies started to finish and with them my attention span. I found myself distracted plenty of times and just realizing it after a while. You really understand that you are tired when you can't concentrate at the point that you don't even realize you are distracted. I started to think that it has been a bad idea. I shouldn't have gone there, because if I wouldn't have finished the essay that night I probably wouldn't have been able to finish it in time with the care I wanted to. I therefore decided that I needed a help. I needed a long, long coffee to wake me up. This gave me the necessary energy to continue my work until the first light arrived to wake up Hull. After a couple of weeks, I received the mark, which really satisfied me. One more time, against all the odds.

It is only now, thinking about that night, that I realize how this can be a fitting metaphor for my whole Erasmus. It started with great curiosity and desire to explore a culture, a city, and a country. Nonetheless I had some difficulties at the beginning, trying to figure out how to do all the exams before leaving. Then these doubts turned into excitement. There were so many new things to explore, to learn. Unfortunately, this is often difficult and tiring. Soon complications and hard moments started. Luckily the spring break and, above all, the visit of my girlfriend, put me back on track, just like a strong, good coffee. At the end, I feel lucky to have had the chance to have this opportunity in which I learnt a lot and from which I got a lot of satisfaction and fulfilment.

