

Honourable Memories

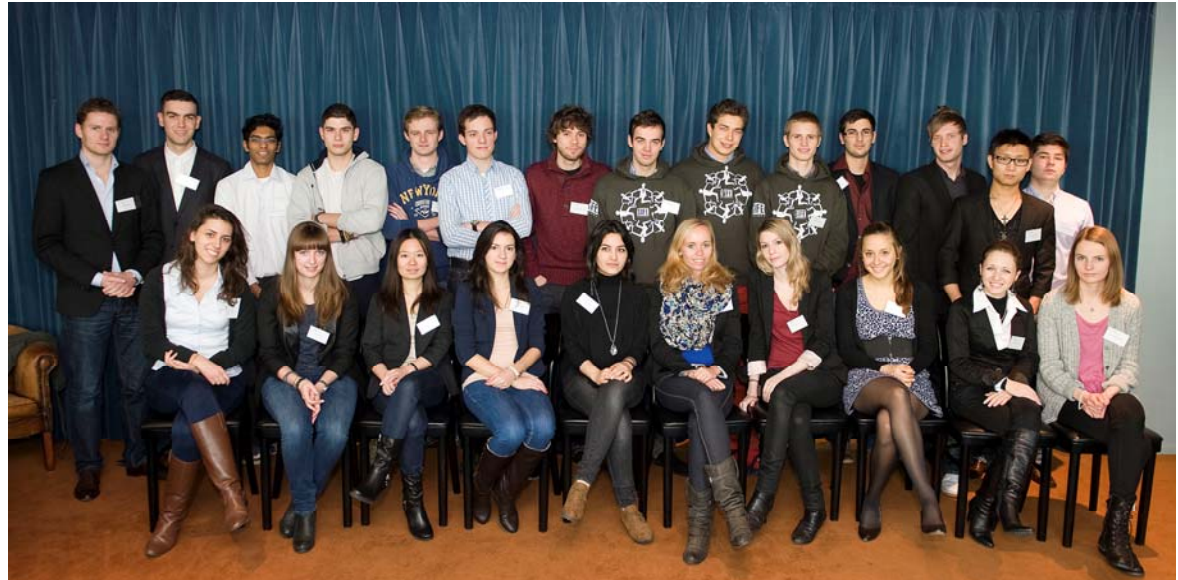
By: Dafna Burema

Rotterdam - Having dinner with two old professors seems like a student's worst nightmare. This was, however, a reality for the Erasmus honours students at the very last day of class. Luckily one of the teachers, perhaps rather awkwardly, broke the ice by starting to talk about menstruation cycles.

"Did you know that when women spend a long time together their periods will eventually start to sync up?" said professor Slawomir Magala.

Yes, the English Erasmus Honours Programme at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam is a curriculum full of surprises. Besides academic disputes and lectures, participants also get to know trivial fun facts.

For instance, did you know Weber is not only affiliated to Marx and Durkheim in a strictly sociological sense? Notice that his full name is Maximilian Karl Emil Weber.



Participants Honours Programme 2012 during the introductionlunch 9 December 2011; Sivan Alon, Vinzenz Bäumer Escobar, Ben Beuchel, Gerard Blok, Dafna Burema, Saverio Calderoni, Hanjun Chen, Aleksej Gabedov, Lara Hilmarsdóttir, Ana Ilie Jitianu, Jere Järleström, Darius Kharazipour, Kees Mackenbach, Anna Karolina Mauch, Tahmiena Miry, Violeta Pashova, Simon Perrigaud, Hubertus Riedesel Freiherr zu Eisenbach, Mircea Tesileanu, Subramanian Venkatesan, Fons Verhoef, Inge de Vreede Rui Wang, Peilu Xu, Iris Yocarini

Photo: Ronald van den Heerik

Thus, his superiority was already enclosed at his baptism, as the cultural sociologist Dick Houtman pointed out.

Hence, if an academic career does not pan out, at least the participants will have acquired enough knowledge to become a perennial winner at Jeopardy. Indeed, the course material covers more than desiccated scientific theories.

This is *Bildung*.

The English Erasmus Honours Programme is the place where schooling and education meet. It does so by connecting students and teachers from several disciplines in order to discuss one central theme: identity. It is only one year old and so it is a fairly new curriculum. But the academic standards are high as it expands the knowledge of participants in a relatively short amount of time. For the entire programme lasts a mere six months.

The first edition has come to an end by now and the selection committee will start recruiting soon. Only students that have gained 60 ECTS credits in their first year and

have a grade average of a 7.5 or higher are eligible for this curriculum. Besides that, future participants need to send in a motivation letter, CV, reference form and a score list of all obtained grades.

At the end students will get a recommendation from the rector magnificus of the University and obtain extra credits worth of 20 ECTS. But there is more to it than just concrete rewards. The gains of this programme are much more subtle. For one, there is an international learning environment where students from all different kinds of backgrounds come together. This alone makes it interesting to discuss identity in relation to the various nationalities. Also, the students and especially the professors are outstanding in their respective fields. Most important of all though, the classes are interactive and engaging.

A different teaching method

Teachers and students from different fields give their thoughts about identity. Sometimes they clash, sometimes they complement each other and at times compromises are made.

This is in line with the core philosophy that is attached to the curriculum. The main reason behind creating a learning environment with diverse perspectives is because difficult concepts and societal problems, such as identity, happiness and poverty, often cannot be described or analyzed within one discipline.

This programme prevents students from being trapped in a single perspective. Students who are knowledgeable of the social sciences all of a sudden get to read articles about how genetics influence people's lives or even populations. The medical student gets to know how the lessons that Aristotle brought to bear about virtues are able to help corporate organizations in their growth. The honours programme gives students with outstanding academic performances the opportunity to broaden their perspective.

It is a completely different approach on schooling compared to the Dutch higher education system. Academia in The Netherlands are mostly concerned with only one study in which students specialize themselves in a certain area of interest. The honours programme takes a different

approach. It rather takes on the form of a liberal arts college, a way of teaching that is more popular in the United States. This means that the students learn material other than is offered at their own study. Experiences from last curriculum clearly show how the Liberal arts approach is applied.

A psychological perspective on identity

The programme was structured in three terms that each deal with a different angle in relation to identity. The first one was called The Individual Identity. That module during last year's honours programme focused on the micro level of identity. It was mainly taught by Rolf Zwaan a professor in biological psychology and cognitive psychology.

The teacher in a formal sense, but he shared a lot of his personal interests and told about his life. Instead of a standard formal academic course, the lessons were much more personal and engaging. For example, when discussing identity and memory, he spoke about his dentist.

Mr. Zwaan was cycling in his neighbourhood when he saw a man approaching him from the opposite direction. He was greeting him. The

teacher did not recognize who he was until a few moments after it happened. It was his dentist. The point that professor Zwaan wanted to make is that the brain has difficulties in placing objects in a different context than you would expect them to be. So without the white dentist coat and the same setting with the typical chair, it was hard to recognize him.

At the same time, term one made clear that our memory is not completely reliable. Hence Zwaan's anecdote might have gone completely different, as I may or may not have remembered it correctly. Or, more extreme, it could be that Zwaan's own account is not entirely correct. Does he remember it well? Maybe he stole the memory from someone else and internalized it, as he taught the class that it sometimes happens.

Other topics that the professor dealt with were self knowledge and consciousness. The main message from all these lectures taught by Mr. Zwaan was that the self is not as plainly clear as people often perceive it to be: we do not know ourselves as much as we think we do, since the unconscious regulates us to a large extent.

This term was characterized by a lot of discussions. The teacher did not even have to create one, but the students themselves were engaged enough to respond to each other's remarks. This did not go unnoticed by the teacher and so he repeatedly said how remarkable it is to have such dedicated students.

Introducing postmodernism...

However, this changed in the second term. The lectures in that module were mostly concerned with a question round at the end. It was certainly the most interesting module of the entire programme from a linguistic point of view. In the very first lecture alone, professor Dick Houtman introduced the English speaking students with the terms "toilet duck" "kips" and "horny glasses". The former was a translation from the Dutch "WC Eend" which is product that helps cleaning toilets. "Kips" was used instead of "chickens" and Mr. Houtman probably meant horn rimmed glasses instead of horny ones.

Without a doubt though, Mr. Houtman is a well respected man and an authority in the

field of cultural sociology. He is going to Yale to further pursue his academic career. He lectured the class about individualization and the counterculture of the 1960's. The professor had an interesting conclusion in which he claims that the self cannot be authentic.

Other lectures on cultural sociology were taught by Stef Aupers and Michiel de Lange. They described how technology influences the self. The key lesson from this module was rooted in a postmodern paradigm, namely, that people have multiple identities. A core identity does not exist according to the cultural sociologists.

The rest of the term was marked with an introduction to genetics, which could be seen as a counterbalance of cultural sociology. Three lectures from diverse specialists discussed an introduction to genetic research, how genes can play a role in forensics and the relationship between populations and genes. It built up on the material learned in the first term. These are factors that influence lives that are not directly controllable, just as the unconscious.

... And moving away from it

Professors Arjo Klamer and Slawomir Magala were the main lecturers of term three. They spoke about identity in work and society. Topics such as European identity, intergroup relations and biographies were discussed. An interesting finding is that Mr. Klamer is not very fond of the rather postmodern view on identity as introduced in term two. Instead of regarding identity as some kind of plural, forever changing entity, Mr. Klamer thinks that in each specific context we should set certain values which we should then abide to. The manager should act as one during his working hours, and not like a friend. A postmodern viewpoint would be that identity is a rather fluid concept in which the manager is able to take on different roles rather than his job function.

Not only individuals should know their place and act accordingly, also organizations need to know their mission statement and keep this in mind when making decisions. Again, the postmodern viewpoint on identity was countered with the idea of a solid identity. Mr. Klamer based his conclusions after reading texts from Aristotle and other philosophers

such as Martha Nussbaum. Mr. Klamer introduced course material about virtues, values and emotivism. Other topics that Mr. Klamer dealt with were the European identity and craftsmanship.

Where Mr. Klamer tried to move away from the postmodern by way of neo-stoic ideas on virtues, Mr. Magala gave a different view on identity. The professor introduced the class with theories of the recently deceased sociologist Philip Rieff. Rieff claimed that since the Second World War, people increasingly stopped having faith in authorities. Instead, people only listened to their own authority. This concern with one's own person is what Rieff called a constant therapy of wellbeing.

The teaching method during this term was rather unorthodox. As an introduction to the module, the class had to write three applications. One for a speed dating session, another one was for volunteering at Greenpeace and the last one was for a bureaucratic organization. In these applications, the participant had to show some biographical elements. This exercise was meant to show the participants how your life story can be adjusted in specific contexts.

Still, the honours programme of this year also contained some formal ways of grading. In term one the students had to make academic posters and present them. Other forms of assessments were essays and a proposal about how to combine cultural sociology with genetics.

Is there more to it?

After reading all this, the honours programme might be perceived as a lot of work. The curriculum may be challenging but most students have experienced it as something that does not put too much pressure on their regular study. The knowledge gained at the curriculum can only help advance students within their discipline and maybe even as a person.

“I learned a lot about how society works in general and living life maybe even. Because you get to learn about personal identity, things that make you think about your own life. Learning is not only about memorizing things, it also about reflecting upon things and applying them to your personal circumstances,” said Vinzenz Bäumer Escóbar, a 19-year-old history student.

Apart from having to deal with academic material, the honours programme offered different social activities.

“It was an honour”

The very last lecture of the last term was held at a restaurant in which students arrived by water taxi on the Maas river. Speaking of food, the BroodExpress provided the students with sandwiches and Dutch *appelflappen* for every lecture.

Besides free food, the honours class also had an excursion called “talent walk”. The participants travelled 18 kilometers by foot in Utrecht. The purpose was to discuss identity in a group and to bond the group more. During that day, the captain of the Dutch national field hockey team Floris Evers gave a talk to the group about life and how we should live it. Other activities were also arranged that day such as a quiz in which participants had to guess which quote belongs to which person. At the end of the day, everybody was

exhausted but it also got the group closer since the participants organized barbecues and other gatherings after school hours.

“When I applied for this programme I thought that most participants would be unsocial nerds. But I was pleasantly surprised since this group is so different from what I expected it to be. The group is really nice,” said participant Kees Mackenbach, 21, who studies econometrics.

In the end, the English Erasmus Honours Programme gave a lot of food for thought. I got the chance to meet people from different backgrounds who are driven and sociable. I experienced it all with pleasure.

It was an honour.