

As soon as we started the in-residence component of the Winter School (WS) we were told that, among others, there were two overarching goals we were expected to achieve: to learn from the cultural diversity in the WS and to be able to deal with uncertainty. For me, that was achieved and it started in the virtual phase. To it positively contributed how expectations were initially set, which allowed me to feel more comfortable in more unexpected or challenging situations: when you are told that unexpected situations might arise and that what you take for granted in working processes is not necessarily so universal, the “world is not such a scary place” when that actually happens, and you feel more capable than before to behave flexibly. The 2010 Erasmus Mundus WS was, without a doubt, a positive, learning experience, that I would repeat without second thoughts.

Aside from this general feeling of development and gain from the experience, there are other particular learning aspects to which I would like to refer. The virtual phase in particular was more enriching than I initially anticipated and, interestingly, I only realized its full richness when I actually met my team in person. As I had the chance to say in the opening ceremony on behalf of my team, the virtual phase served us to build our pillars of relationship and understanding, such that being face-to-face felt like a natural continuance of the virtual phase, and I felt as if I was again in contact with old friends I had not seen in a long time.

The virtual phase also allowed me to practice and develop new communication skills to which I was not used. Being “a visual person”, I often like to illustrate my arguments with drawings or figures; since we had elected Skype as our main communication tool, I sometimes felt out of my territory. To try to overcome that, I had to rely on a different set of skills to convey my ideas and use words more than images to illustrate my points.

Given that the bulk of the virtual phase work was on the Contextual Factors module, a particular learning that I felt occurred in this stage was of content and information regarding the region on which my team was working, the Middle East. Still today, every time I hear the news about the Middle East, I feel like I can understand it differently since what I learned provides now a context to the “facts”.

When the in-residence phase began, as I mentioned earlier, I felt like the foundations for our teamwork were established and it was very easy to start working immediately on what was being

requested of the team. I believe the first couple of days allowed for a confirmation that the strategies we had used in the virtual phase still worked for us in this new setting, and that we could go on using them.

Regarding the modules themselves, it was very fulfilling to feel that in each class there were Professors who were subject-matter experts on the topics at stake. Even when the subject was known to us, it was a nice refreshment and a confirmation and revalidation of our previous knowledge. In my particular position of a European studying in the United States, and who will eventually work in Europe, it was of particular worth to make a comparison between what I had learned in my program and what these scholars and professionals were teaching us. It was reassuring to confirm that, given the necessary cultural adjustments, models, theories and practices I have learned do have a value in the European marketplace. Similarly, it was nice to know that the MS I/O program and the Erasmus Mundus WOP-P Master both use the scientist-practitioner approach.

Thinking about the highlights and lowlights of the 2010 WS, my general feeling is that the highlights clearly overcome the lowlights. The first highlight that comes to mind is how the organization was in general very effective with minimal issues (assuming there are always issues in an event of this magnitude). Even during the virtual phase, the fliers that were sent out were informative and helpful (e.g., information about affordable meals). After this time has passed I still cannot believe how good of a price we had for 13 nights at the Tryp Hotel.

After the opening ceremony, I was even more convinced about the great amount of work that was behind all the WS event and behind making it easy and workable for the teams. One example of this is the daily bus to the University. Even though it seems more comfortable than anything else, it is my belief that the bus was instrumental in making our classes flow naturally and actually start more or less on time.

Another example is the fact that each group constantly had one room available in which to work at the university and that rooms attributed to the WS event were clearly marked. Given the workload and the time management that goes with it, it was comforting to know that we did not need to worry about finding the next place to work.

One third aspect I would like to mention is the organization's responsiveness to the teams' requests and needs. I believe it was very important to have the feedback meeting with the Professors Friday afternoon. Not only did we have the chance to give our feedback, but also gave us a chance to see the organization of the WS be responsive to that. For instance, some groups felt the fact the Faculty closed early was impairing their ability to work late and needed alternatives; even though it was not

possible to change that, in one or two days we had an email with a list of places (e.g., cafés) around the Faculty and the Hotel that were open until late and in where it was possible to work.

Finally, among many other highlights, I would like to emphasize the methodology behind the Intervention Design module. The fact that we had the chance to interview the stakeholders, the case-study and action nature of the whole exercise made me feel more like an actual consultant. I know it is unrealistic to have such a methodology in every module, and it does require more intense work, but in my opinion it is a very big highlight to have at least this module with this methodology.

Regarding the lowlights of the WS, I believe one aspect that could be improved is the interaction between the Personnel track and the Organizational track. The fact that we did have the coffee breaks at the same time did improve the interaction, but I still felt like I wanted to know more of what was being learned on the other classroom, and maybe also learn from it. I am not sure if it is realistic to do it, but maybe one way for this to happen would be to dedicate a part of the feedback session to this mutual sharing, and restrict it to the most different modules we have.

Taking into account the amount of work that went in the Contextual Factors module in the virtual phase, it seemed we did not spend enough time reflecting in the larger group during the in-residence phase. On the other hand, the Intervention Design module could have included some more preparatory work, given the preponderance of it during the WS. I realize the methodology itself requires much in-presence experience, but maybe having prior readings on the Design Methodology and practice on how to write a Program of Requirements could have helped to smooth the transition to actually start working on the case.

Despite these improvement suggestions, the highlights supersede the lowlights to a great extent. Overall, it was very fulfilling to be in a respectful and hardworking group. I can say I probably did not learn from handling difficult group situations because there were not any in that intervention was felt needed. But for me, it was a very important learning experience to feel that I could trust my group and each person's work.

Participating in the WS was a life-enriching experience, an amazing opportunity to learn from more than a dozen different cultures, the chance to rediscover my friends and make new ones, being in the same room with remarkable Professors who are both scholars and practitioners and, in this particular case, to re-experience my country in a whole new perspective. I am deeply grateful to all who made our participation possible and who contributed for it to be such a fulfilling experience, whether or not they were present in Coimbra.