Once an Erasmus student,
now an Erasmus Club tutor

Once an Erasmus student, now an Erasmus Club tutor: Two perspectives on the Erasmus experience in Charles University, Prague

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The Erasmus Club at the Faculty of Arts has existed since the 2003/4 academic year. Throughout this time, it has not only offered a diverse program of events and activities for Erasmus and international students of Charles University, but has also given an opportunity to ex-Erasmus students, who have returned to Prague, to rejoin the Erasmus community as tutors. Thus far, the Club has recruited four former Erasmus students – Céline Leclerc (France), Daniel Kortschak (Austria), Tanja Amtmann (Germany) and Mari Jännetyinen (Finland). To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus program, we asked them to share their experience of tutoring the new generation of Erasmus students.

Our first interview is with Daniel Kortschak, a former student of University of Vienna who studied at the Faculty of Arts in 2006.

Daniel, what has motivated you to become a tutor of the Erasmus Club?

When I was an Erasmus student in Prague, I really liked the excursions, the Czech film screenings among other events organised, like the country presentations. It was the best way to meet other students – not only from the Erasmus community, but also local Czech students studying in Charles University. The opportunity to engage with locals was especially important to me as I was learning Czech.

I returned to Prague about six months later after my Erasmus to work and was delighted to meet these friends again. Indeed, when the Erasmus Club asked me if I would like to become a tutor, I agreed immediately. For me, it was an ideal way to give back a little bit of what I'd experienced through the Club when I was a student here. Whilst it was also a good way for me to meet new people from all over Europe, and beyond. I am still in touch some of these friends even now after three to four years.

How does it feel to stand "on the other side"? Did you still feel like an Erasmus student, or more like a local person helping international and European students in your home country?

Admittedly the excursions with Erasmus students made me feel like I was on Erasmus once again, though as I have been working full-time, I no longer felt quite like a student. Nonetheless there were – brief – moments when I felt more like a kindergarden teacher than anything else, especially when, for example, students did not show up at the railway station on time.

What do you like about being an Erasmus Club tutor? Have you ever done something similar at your home university? Are there any similar societies, clubs or associations for Erasmus and/or International students? If yes, do you know how they recruit their tutors?

I was only too happy to show students from all over Europe and further afield some of the most interesting and beautiful places in the Czech Republic - the place where I lived for several years and consider to be one of the most culturally rich countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

I never worked as a tutor before in my home university of Vienna. Furthermore in Vienna, these activities are predominantly organized by the official Students' Council to which you have to be elected to, and which are often connected to political parties.

Charles University generally approaches previous years' Erasmus students upon their return to Prague to ask if they would like to become an Erasmus Club tutor. As a former Erasmus student, you knew how the Club worked from you first hand experience of studying here on Erasmus. Yet Czech tutors usually only realize that the Club exists once they themselves have participated in an international exchange. How did you find the processes of cooperation and teamwork between Czech, and especially younger, tutors? Was it strange to have to assist to local tutors who were completely new to the Erasmus Club?

No, that was not strange at all. Cooperating and working with any and all Czech students was always a very rewarding experience.

What did you expect from the Erasmus Club at Charles University as a student here? Which activities did you like best then as a student, and now as a tutor?

I expected to get to know many people from both the Czech Republic and abroad, to find out interesting things about the Czech Republic and to discover several unknown places in Prague and beyond. I especially liked the excursions (e.g.

Český Krumlov) and the Czech film evenings. I particularly enjoyed the strong cultural orientation of the Erasmus Club's activity program. For me, it was an important complementary element of my studies here. It enabled me to orientate myself and to better understand some specifically 'Czech' issues and features of Czech daily life. These activities were also quite fun.

You are now finished your studies. How different is it to live in Prague as student and as an employed person? Were there any differences in the approach and attitudes of local people to you as student and as a working person?

It is not hard at all to live as an Erasmus student in Prague. I really appreciated that Charles University organizes almost everything prior to students' arrival. You just have to check into the dorm and attend the orientation session at your host faculty. And where there are any problems, you can always contact the tutors or the International Office to resolve them. Living and working in Prague may be a bit more difficult. I had to live in a shared flat because rents are relatively high in Prague – higher than I could afford anyway. But that really depends on the job.

I did not really notice any differences in locals' attitudes toward me as a student and as a working person. But I had the big advantage of being able to speak Czech. Some international friends of mine told me that they believe local Czechs are not as welcoming nor as friendly when you do not speak Czech – especially in some restaurants and public offices. However, for me personally, I have only had good experiences in public Czech institutions – both as a private person and as a working journalist.

The things I like most in about Prague are - besides the incredibly beautiful architecture – are its green surroundings, the rich array of cultural events on offer and the excellent public transport infrastructure that allows you to get to A from B at practically anytime, day or night. The only thing I have missed are suitable bike-lanes – unlike many European cities, cycling to university or work is extremely dangerous, if not impossible in Prague.

Why did you decide to return to Prague after your studies? Would you like to live here long-term and do you think that your Erasmus experience in Prague has influenced that decision?

I decided to come back to Prague as I received an offer to intern in a local, German language newspaper during my Erasmus stay. During the internship, I got a more permanent job offer from Czech Radio (*ČRO)*. Hence I lived and worked in Prague for roughly four years and I can say that I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of my stay. It was the best time of my life. Unfortunately, my contract was not renewed in January 2011, due to budget cuts in *ČRO*'s international section. I would have definitely liked to have stayed on for a few more years, or maybe even forever!

Have you worked all the time in Prague as journalist? What do you do now?

I finished Erasmus in the summer of 2007 and came back to intern with Prager Zeitung in March 2008. After a short break in June, I began working at Radio Prague, the six-language international service of public Czech Radio, in July 2008. After my contract was terminated in January 2011, I moved back to Vienna that March where I started to work for the online department of a large Austrian newspaper. I have been living in Frankfurt am Main since January 2012, where I work as a news editor for a sizeable publishing company that owns titles such as Frankfurter Rundschau and Berliner Zeitung.

Thank you for the interview.