

Maths Bertell, Mid-Sweden University and UC Berkeley

Teaching Sabbatical – Final report

Report information

Preparation and planning

Brief description of how the activities at the foreign institution were planned.

The preparations for the teaching activities started in the early spring of 2016. In discussions with professor Wellendorf, we decided on the basic teaching idea for the course *Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia* (Scan 123) with books and source folder. With professor Heslop's course (Scan 125), I wasn't part of the planning, but asked to do a number of lectures with topics drawn from my expertise. With prof. Wellendorf's class we had a plan that we actually managed to stick too, but even so, we had a continuous discussion on the teaching and on what to teach. The students expected us to have a detailed plan right from the start with specified reading for each occasion. This is something I'm used to but not for an entire semester! I worked out fine though, and we could do minor adjustments along the way. Coming from a small environment with few teachers, it was a lot of fun to collaborate for an entire semester with someone who's in the same field as yourself.

In March I went to Berkeley to set up for the fall. I managed to get ourselves a house, look at some of the schools and meet with most of the Department, except for Mark Sandberg who had his sabbatical in Switzerland. I was welcomed by Karin Sanders instead, and felt at home right away.

The planning and execution of the teaching has really gone smoothly and professors Wellendorf and Heslop was really pleasant to be around.

Tasks and responsibilities

Description of your position and work responsibilities at the foreign institution. Specify if the tasks were carried out individually or in cooperation with local resources.

At the department, all my tasks were related to teaching, either as lecturing myself or as sitting in on other teachers' classes. Reading mid-term exams, essays and finals and grading them, even though the professor I was teaching with had the final say. I also had office hours where both undergraduate and graduate students would come and see me. I took part in faculty meetings. I was also asked to do

a number of research related talks, which drew attention and benefitted students and the department. Most interesting of these were the possibility to participate in the Aarhus Mythology conference which is an annual event, that has previously been at Harvard, Stockholm, Reykjavik and Aarhus, with top researchers from around the world. This was open to the students and many of them participated. If writing a summary on two talks, they received extra credits.

Activities during the semester

Summary of the main activities carried out at the foreign institution, including how you have participated in other activities than (co-)teaching your own course(s).

The main activities were teaching above mentioned classes, but also participating in the department's higher seminar, where I also had the opportunity to give a paper. I was also lucky to be present for the annual mythology conference held at the department with high ranked scholars from my own field. At the conference I also presented a paper and students from our classes were encouraged to participate in conference and write a short abstract on the papers to receive extra marks. Apart from that, I also participated in faculty meetings, a CTL seminar (Center for Teaching and Learning) and social activities at the department as well as other activities on campus.

Important lessons

What knowledge of importance for your role as teacher/researcher have you gained during your time as a STINT-fellow?

During my stay at UC Berkeley's Department of Scandinavian, I have been made aware of my own teaching style and the value of running a course over a full semester. Mostly, I have had several things in my role as teacher/researcher confirmed. A good teacher is available for the students, and teaches the things she/he also researches. The distance between teaching and research should hence be short. A teacher with no possibility for research, will in the long run also become a bad teacher. I also learned that, for a teacher to be successful, the chair of the department and the colleagues of said teacher, needs to show confidence in that the teacher will be up for the task, otherwise he/she wouldn't be there. Other lessons learned, is the continuing discussion on pedagogy, courses relevance for the aim of the department. The continuous talk on pedagogy, course structure and aims is something that I have brought with me and has now become part of my new responsibilities at Mid-Sweden University's Department of Humanities. I will, together with colleagues in the Swedish subject, arrange seminars and workshops. This is a new effort from the university to raise the awareness among professors on their teaching, but also on how much knowledge and experience there is in among teachers that never is brought out in the light or discussed. Since university pedagogy is a relatively new field, there is still a lot to be done.

Comparison between the foreign and the home institutions (in Sweden)

Please discuss differences and similarities and possibilities for changes in Sweden (and abroad) in relation to aspects such as:

- Student population

The student population at UC Berkeley is about 8 times the population at Mid-Sweden University. The diversity is also different, ethnically and racially. At Mid-Sweden University, the students are predominantly white Europeans, while there is really no group in majority at Cal. The biggest student group is probably Asian Americans, about 40%. But within that group there is of course a lot of different ethnicities. The UC Berkeley students are also a lot younger than the students at Mid-Sweden University. In Sweden, students usually do not transfer right away from high school, this being especially true for students within humanities. In Sweden, programs focused specifically towards a trade is more similar to the US. So while having students in their late teens to early twenties at Cal, in Sweden the range would be from early twenties to late thirties. The students at Cal are the top 10% of America's Highschool graduates. This is not the case with the students of Mid-Sweden University. Then of course most students in Sundsvall wouldn't wear shorts and flipflops to class in December either.

- The relation between research and education

The academic year at the Department of Scandinavian differs in many ways from Sundsvall and Sweden in general. While the Service plan at Mid-Sweden University focus on teaching and research (if there is any at all) fills out the gaps between the lectures, the academic system in the US offers sabbatical semesters and no teaching in the summers. I had the impression that research at Department of Scandinavian is the basis that education and teaching benefits from and gets its energy from. An academic department with little or no time for research will in the long run be poor, inadequate and dated.

- The relation between teacher and student

I found the students at Cal friendly, interested and well performing. The biggest difference from my students in Sundsvall would be the age difference and level of maturity. I have never had a student fall asleep at a lecture before coming to California, but now it has happened! I guess that being a teenager sometimes gets the upper hand over being a student. I was constantly called 'Professor Bertell' at UC Berkeley, as opposed to 'Maths' in Sweden. While this is mostly superficial, I didn't experience any major differences in teacher-student relations from my home department.

- The institution's view of breadth versus specialization in education

The Department of Scandinavian is very small and generally perceived as narrow and specialized from the outside. But considering its smallness, the department offers a broad set of courses: Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Finnish, Icelandic and Old Norse among languages, and to this several courses of literature studies, both historical and contemporary. This width is actively pursued and defended by the Chair, Mark Sandberg, towards the dean. Back home, we have subjects clearly defined from each other. There is no common goal for the department as a whole, basically because we are five distinct subjects (Swedish, English, Literature, History and Religion) with no common denominator. Each subject has a number of different specialties. Only in my subject we have five: Old Nordic religion, Old Indian religion, Gnosticism, Religion and popular culture and Esoterism. In the Department of Scandinavian there is a common interest in the Nordic countries and their language and culture, albeit different time periods. We have tried to develop cross section interest groups within our department in Sundsvall (Eco-criticism, Migration and Nordic Culture and History) but with little effect. The Swedish system is entirely different in this aspect. At the Department of Scandinavian, language forms the base of everything else. It's impressive that a such a small department is able to offer 5 modern languages and a historic, and that the students may major in 3 of them. The dynamics of such a small department with professors with different specialties but sharing a common interest, seems to boost not only research and higher seminars, but also teaching. To elaborate something similar at our department would be interesting.

- Competence development for teachers

Teachers at the department had the possibility to participate in the courses, seminars and work shops held by the Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning, but so far none had been there. Despite this the staff at the department had a good impression of the CTL and their offered courses. However, the limited time really made it difficult to take the step and go ahead and attend. Even though none from the department had participated so far, the staff at CTL were well aware of the department in a positive way. What had echoed from the department was how much the students appreciated the professors and their teaching. The CTL had been around for four years, from a point where they had closed down the old facility and gave them a fresh start. Richard and Yukiko who were now running the center, were told by the principal that they should start a 'Teachers' boot camp'. Not thinking that such a boot camp would really appeal so much to teachers in general, they instead headed the other way, building a reputation slowly on positive forces in different subjects, rather than trying to convince negative or prejudiced faculty. CTL had also experienced positive side effects from their seminars, such as groups formed at their courses continued to meet after the course!

- Teacher recruitment. Pedagogy and its importance. The status of pedagogical merits compared to research merits

Teacher recruitment at the Department of Scandinavian is firstly based on Nordic language skills, secondly on research focus. This means, teaching is more important here, than in Sweden. Recruiting to academic positions in Sweden is much focused on research and overrides teaching ability and personal qualities. As far as I could tell, how a person would fit into a department is of greater concern in at the Department of Scandinavian, than it would be in Sweden. Collaboration difficulties and other social issues would not be valid in a Swedish recruitment process. They would possibly be taken into account, but not officially. Having said that, pedagogy has as central role in the Department of Scandinavian that the employees is not always aware of. In the Swedish departments I have been teaching at, teaching is always central and research time is something that you shouldn't count on and if you get it, be grateful. In general, and now I may be a bit biased, but in the humanities, research is really seen as something to cheer university professors up with, not so much creating any substantial value that would benefit the students or the public.

- Curriculum and courses offered

Department of Scandinavian offered language courses in the Nordic languages and literature and history classes on top of that. Some of the courses had special, narrow interests like the 'HC Andersen's authorship', as opposed to our course 'Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia', with a broader scope. Department of Scandinavian offers undergraduate and graduate courses. It's possible to major in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian and to get a PhD. Since the Department of Scandinavian is relatively small compared to our department at home, but big compared to my subject, it's hard to make a comparison. My general impression of the department of Scandinavian is that they do get a lot from their teachers, happy students, a lot of writing and a good reputation. They attract several visiting scholars a year. While I was there, there were at least three other than me. This of course adds to the general milieu and also the attracts other scholars, further ahead. If I ever get the chance, I would love to go back.

- Forms of examination

Our course at Cal followed a traditional form I learned, with written tests for mid-term and finals, while the essay on the second half of the semester was something new that Prof. Wellendorf wanted to try. We had students that needed more of time due to personal issues, and that was cared for. The examination differs a lot from how we do it in Sundsvall. We have essays due every week, but then our students have one course at the time while the students at Cal have 4-6 running parallel

throughout the semester. Other teachers at the department in California had slightly different variants to this system, it especially varied between history/literature classes and language classes. The latter often had quizzes each week or other forms of 'lighter' exams. The same difference can be spotted here in Sundsvall, language classes demand other variants.

- To what extent educational programs conform to labour market needs

This one is a bit tricky to answer, as the academic exam in form of a college degree in the US is considered of value, no matter what subject. In Sweden, a *kandidatexamen* is almost frowned upon if it doesn't contain something that could be easily transferred to an office task or HR job. With a college degree, my impression was that future employers took it as a sign of independence and work ethos. With the wrong academic exam or level of exam in Sweden, you may actually ban yourself from the labour market. A PhD has very limited value outside the academic world, almost the opposite.

- Use of technology

Technology was not cutting edge at Department of Scandinavian or in the classroom building. In general, Cal is a bit worn by Swedish standards and the lack of cleaners (yes, they've cut them out to save money). We used the black board and screened our power points onto the white screen in the front of the class room to show pictures and clips. Prof. Wellendorf was particularly amused by pulling down the white screen. :D Internet access was in general good throughout campus, and never malfunctioned while I was there. Most of the student material was uploaded on Bcourses, a basic but functioning home page system where the students and teachers would log in for articles and other things needed for their studies and teaching.

- Distance education

The distance education at Scandinavian was a lot more limited than I had hoped, and I didn't get the opportunity to participate in any seminars or classes. Which was a pity, since most of our courses at MIUN are web based.

- Relation between the institution and its environment

Anywhere you go on Cal or talk to people about your engagement at Department of Scandinavian, everyone, without exception would say 'oh, they're such nice people? Have you met prof. (insert anyone at the department)? She/he was really the best when..' and so forth. Department of Scandinavian has a great reputation, and it's well earned. In some cases, the professors have their

positions shared between two departments, which benefits students and research milieu at both departments. Other than personal connections like that, most interdepartmental contacts happen on seminars organized by 'clubs' such as the Medieval mailing list. Social activities will occasionally happen together with the other departments on the same floor or in the Ishi Court, but as for other collaborations, there was little signs of it. The same goes to say about my department in Sundsvall. Outside the Department of Humanities, there's few contacts or collaborations. While the department in Berkeley was much appreciated, I have no idea how the humanities are received at Mid-Sweden University. But the collaborations I am involved in, like the teachers' education, usually runs smoothly.

- Special investments in education at the institution.

As far as I can tell, the department supports its professors, but no special investments have been made. They encourage everyone to participate in CTL courses and seminars.

Action plan - topics to address and if possible introduce in Sweden

- Personally

Already in Berkeley, I started to re-organize my spring courses at Mid-Sweden University. This came about after discussion with Professor Wellendorf on the case of how to avoid stereotype images of Old Norse religion. Other ideas that has inspired me was first day surveys for the students, as suggested on one of the CTL seminars. In our department, there is a problem with a lot of students dropping out. Since the economy is based on how many students enroll and how many fulfill and pass the course, this is a problem. So far, we have not been able to tell why students drop out: it is not depended on grades, top students drop out as well as poor students. Is work overload? Maybe, because a lot of our courses are distance courses with web seminars and some students work full time and try to follow a full time on line course. This is rarely successful. So, with a first day survey, we not only get to know what the incentives are for the students but also, in the long run, we get to know who are most likely to stay and who's not.

- For the department

Since our organization has one department (Department of humanities) divided into several subjects (5), I'm going to write about the department. This semester, the department offered 20 % of a full time (340 h) to improve pedagogical performance and discussion among the teachers. I had 10% of these, and two of my colleagues in Swedish language got 5% each. So far, we have only had time to roughly discuss on what we want to do. The above mentioned first day survey could be one thing for the department as a whole. Main focus will be to create a pedagogy seminar for all teachers to raise

awareness on pedagogical issues and share experience and knowledge from teaching. In the spirit of CTL we will also focus on those who wants to participate and be part of improvement and change.

- For the institution

So far, the only change we have seen is an awareness of the STINT Teaching Sabbatical. Lena Ivarsson (STINT fellow) and I have discussed putting a group together for STINT fellows to discuss pedagogical matters and help future applicants. The group could develop into a part of the UNT (utbildningsnära tjänster) at Mid-Sweden University.

- In the Swedish research and education system.

At universities and colleges in Sweden, not enough focus has been put on pedagogy. Since the end of the 1990s, the situation has changed and there are more resources located to the issue. But still a general discussion is lacking. Lately there is a new star in sky: Högskolepedagogiska torget on Facebook, started by Johan Wickström from Uppsala University. Links, discussions and help is offered.

Also the relation between research and teaching has been ignored. A teacher that is also a international researcher, is likely to become a better teacher by being up to date with the latest discoveries, trends and discussions. This is of course especially true for graduate and PhD students, but also undergraduate essays and basic training would benefit from an increased possibility for research. But not only does the time for research need to be increased, it also needs to be better organized. As of today, a lot of professors at Swedish universities have their research time scattered across the year, which is very ineffective. If the Swedish government wants to elevate the quality of higher education, a reform needs to be done. When comparing to the professors at the Department of Scandinavian, our work load may not be so much heavier, but we teach all year, including summer. They, on the other hand, teach two courses each semester and summers free. Every seventh semester is a sabbatical, teaching free research. This results in more publications, better equipped teachers and advisors and from that, better student performance.