

Teaching Sabbatical at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), fall quarter, 2024

I spent the fall quarter of 2025 in the psychology department at UCLA. In my application, I had three main objectives for a teaching sabbatical at UCLA; a) to gain international teaching experience, b) to learn new pedagogical approaches for teaching issues of race and ethnicity, and c) for professional growth. In this report, I will describe how I achieved these objectives and share my experiences related to the sabbatical.

First, I would like to take this opportunity to thank STINT for this wonderful opportunity.

Before Leaving – Planning and Preparation

I have previously been a visiting scholar at UCLA twice: once as a PhD student for three months in 2008 and again as a postdoc for nine months in 2013. During both visits, I was primarily involved in research and did not have the opportunity to teach. Reflecting on this, I realize it was a missed opportunity. As a result, in my application to STINT, I chose UCLA as my sole destination and expressed a desire to work with Dr. Jaana Juvonen, a professor with whom I had previously collaborated and kept in contact. Although I didn't reach out to her before submitting my application, she emailed me after UCLA contacted her to ask if she would support my application, and she expressed her enthusiasm to do so. This was prior to the interviews, so we both kept our fingers crossed, and we were thrilled when STINT informed me that my application had been approved. Dr. Juvonen's support and shared excitement throughout the process have made this experience a joy.

Due to health issues in the spring semester, I did not make a pre-visit; however, since I had been to UCLA before and already knew some people, it still felt manageable. Dr. Juvonen and I held several online meetings where we began planning the course objectives and content. Given our shared research interests and mutual understanding of each other's work, it was easy to agree on the direction of the course.

UCLA is a large institution, and it seems that the level of administrative support for STINT fellows varies greatly depending on the department and the experience of the administrative staff. There were two STINT fellows at UCLA in the fall of 2024, and our experiences in the preparation phase were quite different. My administrative contact was very friendly and did her best to help, but she expressed that she had never handled such a situation before and needed to figure out each step of the process. There was some confusion regarding my title during the visit, as each title appears to come with different responsibilities. In the end, they decided I would be a visiting professor, which entailed both teaching and research, but this decision meant that I could only be hired without a salary for the fall quarter (October–December 2025; more on that later). Consequently, the process was lengthy and time-consuming, and all the necessary paperwork was only finalized just before the summer break. Fortunately, I was able to secure an appointment for a visa interview in July, and I received my visa a few weeks later, which allowed me to book my flight.

UCLA operates on a quarter system, and the psychology department follows this structure. The fall quarter begins at the end of September and ends in December. This posed a challenge for me, as the department had written my contract to start on October 1st. I was told that as a visiting professor, this was the only option. As a result, when I arrived on September 1st, I didn't have access to key systems like email or the learning platform, Bruin Learn (Canvas), until a month later, after the course had already begun. This made it impossible to complete preparations or administrative tasks before the course started. Had I known this beforehand, I would have considered arriving later or trying to convince the department to hire me under a different title that would grant me earlier access to the administrative systems. In the end, I gained access in time for the start of the course, but it involved a lot of emails and time-consuming follow-up.

One thing I failed to learn before arriving was the requirement for all teaching staff to be vaccinated against both the flu and COVID-19. This information was shared with me by the other STINT fellows once we arrived in California, and it turned out to apply to me as well. The cost of the COVID-19 vaccine (200 USD) was not covered by the insurance from Kammarkollegiet; however, all teaching staff at UCLA could receive the flu shot for free. I took the flu shot first and experienced a strong reaction, including fever and body aches. As a result, I decided not to take the COVID-19 shot. I wish I had known about this requirement before leaving Sweden, as it would have allowed me to get the vaccinations here, thereby avoiding being ill in the US and losing time.

Tasks and Responsibilities

The Course

The course Dr. Juvonen and I co-taught was an undergraduate special seminar, meaning it was a selective course for students at different levels and disciplines. We had the freedom to decide on the content, curriculum, and the maximum number of students. We chose to offer a course titled "Diverse contexts, relationships, and social identity development" for a maximum of 25 students (we ended up with 24). Classes were held every Tuesday from 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM. We usually started with a shorter lecture, followed by a class assignment in smaller groups or pairs, and then reconvened for a discussion. Each week, students were assigned one or two research articles to read, and most in-class activities were based on these readings. Students were also given an assignment each week, either to prepare a discussion for class or to submit something before class.

Something new to me, but much appreciated, was the "office hours," where students could come to my office to discuss the course. I liked the idea; however, very few students took advantage of this opportunity, especially at the beginning of the course. Most students preferred to meet online, as they were commuting to campus.

For Dr. Juvonen and me, co-teaching meant that we planned the overall content and course objectives together. We divided the weeks between us, with one of us in charge of the lecture and the other overseeing the in-class activities. We were both present in the classroom, but one of us took a leading role while the other contributed, graded

engagement, and tracked participation (see below). This arrangement worked well, as much of the class involved group work and student discussions. We could split up and monitor discussions in smaller groups.

We graded assignments individually at first, then compared and discussed our grades before agreeing on a final grade. One thing that was new to me was that the curriculum allowed us to break down the overall grade into percentages, including aspects such as participation (arriving and leaving class on time, informing us when absent, completing extra assignments for missed classes) and engagement (being active in the classroom, providing feedback to fellow students, and asking and answering questions). Although this required us to stay organized in tracking each student's progress and extra assignments, I found it beneficial to be able to grade what happened in the classroom, making it clear that attendance and participation had consequences.

The most common question I get as a teacher in Sweden when starting a new course is, "What do I have to attend?" My biggest challenge is teaching students I never meet. However, it struck me that grading engagement suits some students better than others. Despite our efforts to create an open and supportive classroom environment, some students told me they were shy, suffered from social anxiety, and/or found it very difficult to speak in class. We provided support to these students, and they all expressed that they grew from overcoming their fears, but I cannot disregard the fact that this grading system resulted in them receiving lower grades. In a class on diversity, it should not be the case that students have unequal opportunities to receive the highest grades. This is true in Sweden as well, where we sometimes have oral examinations and presentations.

The student group was diverse in terms of background, race, age, major, and educational level. For some, this was one of their first experiences in higher education, while others were in their final semester. Teaching a class on diversity to such a diverse group of students is an opportunity to "practice what we teach." In the planning phase, we decided to base the course content on the theories and findings we were teaching. For example, we know from research that students tend to pick friends to work with when given the chance. Therefore, for the final project, which was conducted in pairs, we decided to give students the opportunity to select a partner with similar interests in a topic, rather than someone they already knew. This approach required more time and effort on our part. For instance, we created discussion boards on Canvas and organized several occasions for students to "pitch" their ideas to each other. One of these activities was a very loud hour of "speed dating," where all students met for a few minutes to share ideas (see pictures below). This method of modeling the course content is something I will carry forward and develop further in my teaching in Sweden (see "Lessons Learned and Action Plan" below).

Second, teaching about issues of race, ethnicity, power, intersectionality, and multiethnic relations is relatively recent at Swedish universities. As such, another one of my aims was to learn new pedagogical approaches for addressing these issues in class. The American and Swedish contexts differ in many ways, and when planning the course, we decided to use these different contexts to challenge assumptions and employ cross-

country comparisons to gain a broader perspective. We therefore included research articles from various parts of the world, primarily Europe, and encouraged students to consider how macro-level factors influence how we think about and address these issues.



In my experience, people in the U.S. are not afraid to talk about issues of diversity, race, or ethnicity, but when asked to define these terms, they often struggle to formulate an answer. I think this is true for all of us: we cannot always express what we consider to be the norm, and our meta discussions in class highlighted that we cannot take for granted that the concepts we use mean the same thing for everyone. This effort to encourage students to understand the situations and perspectives of others is something that motivates me and is something I would like to develop further in my classes in Sweden.

As I understand, UCLA is organized in downpipes, and administrative staff have clearly defined tasks and responsibilities within specific departments. As a result, finding the "right" person proved to be challenging. For example, I was happy to get in contact with someone from IT, only to discover that he was not "my IT person" and therefore could not assist me. The administrative contact at my department turned out to be the gatekeeper, and all issues had to go through her. However, helping me was an additional task added to her already busy workload, and although she was very helpful, I often felt like a nuisance. As I understand it, I was the first STINT fellow to visit the department, and it seems she had to reinvent the wheel, even though there had been previous STINT fellows at UCLA, and another STINT fellow, Merima Bruncevic, was at the law department at the same time.



Other Activities

The Psychology department at UCLA consists of 9 areas, with neuro- and cognitive psychology being the largest. I belonged to the developmental psychology area, which has 6 professors with their labs. All staff and graduate students meet once a week in the "Developmental Forum," where invited researchers and/or students present their research. I was invited to give a talk about my current research, including information about my journey as a researcher to inspire the students. My talk was titled "Look at What's Happening Last Night in Sweden" (a quote from Donald Trump) and focused on the current situation in Sweden and how it is affecting the identity work of youth today. The students were quite surprised to hear about the gang violence and increased criminality among Swedish youth, and the following discussion was very informative.

Just like with the students in our class, I always find it rewarding to discuss my research with people outside of the Swedish context, as it makes me more aware of my own assumptions. After the talk, I had lunch with a student who was about to graduate and was interested in doing a post-doc in Germany. I provided him with information about relevant grants to apply for. I also connected with a visiting professor from Germany and am planning a visit to her research group in Potsdam later this year.

The STINT midterm meeting took place in Phoenix, at Arizona State University (ASU). It was a great day where all STINT fellows in the U.S. shared their experiences. We also had the opportunity to listen to a teacher who has been integrating AI into his courses, as well as to the IT team at ASU, who spoke about how they have been using AI in student communication. At my home department in Sweden, there is ongoing discussion about how we as teachers should approach the fact that our students are using AI, whether we like it or not. I teach courses in academic writing and feel a strong need to teach students how to use AI as a tool for writing academic texts, but not as the final product. The presentations at ASU sparked new ideas and reinforced my belief in the importance of incorporating AI into my teaching to a greater extent.

In the afternoon, we were invited to Dreamscape Learn, where we had the opportunity to try out how virtual reality (VR) is used in education at ASU. It was a fun and exciting experience that I'm glad I got to participate in, though it felt quite different from my own

teaching. However, I have a friend and fellow researcher at ASU – Dr. Thao Ha – and I stayed an extra day in Phoenix to meet with her. It turns out that she is conducting research in Dreamscape and has similar ideas about using these experiences to explore racism and discrimination. I have now applied for a Visiting Researcher Grant for Dr. Ha to visit University West and Gothenburg University to talk about her research, and for us to start writing a joint research grant.

Comparison

In my experience, teaching at UCLA is not very different from teaching in Sweden. The students are quite similar in many ways, and the role and responsibilities of a teacher are also quite comparable. However, there are a few differences that stood out to me. First, in the psychology department, the academic year is divided into quarters, and during each quarter, students take several parallel courses, each of which has a mid-term exam and a final exam around the same time. Although students in Sweden might also be enrolled in multiple courses or have jobs at the same time, this quarter system seemed to make the workload particularly intense.

Second, it might have something to do with the format of the special seminar, but I found that preparation was shorter than in Sweden and involved less paperwork. While in Sweden we need to have all the course materials—such as the curriculum and reading list—ready months before the course starts, at UCLA it was sufficient for these documents to be ready at the beginning of the course. This allowed us more time to work through the course plan and even make adjustments during the course, making us more flexible and responsive to the students' needs and interests. The fact that we only had 24 students also made it easier to get to know them, especially since we built classroom discussions based on their own experiences.

Another difference I noticed was that teaching seemed to be more individually organized, and as such, I am very glad that I was co-teaching with Professor Juvonen. For me, the discussions I had with Dr. Juvonen, both while planning the course and, more importantly, during the course, were the most rewarding part of this sabbatical. We had time to engage in discussions about the pedagogical aspects that emerged in class, as well as in-depth discussions about the content and issues we encountered. The opportunity to reflect together with an experienced teacher and researcher on these topics was invaluable, and I am taking much from these discussions into my own work. It was a priceless experience, one that could only have been achieved through face-to-face conversations.

I teach courses on diversity, ethnic identity, and multiethnic classrooms in Sweden; so, the topic itself is not new to me. However, I found it easier and less restrictive to discuss these issues in the American context. In Sweden, these are sensitive topics, and students are often unsure of how to express themselves, fearing that they might offend someone or be mislabeled. In the American context, people are used to describing and labeling themselves in terms of identity categories, and they often include their pronouns when introducing themselves or on their name tags. Thus, most students were involved in the discussions and shared their experiences.

Lesson Learned & Action Plan

At the individual Level, I will develop the idea to model what I am teaching and putting it into practice, even if only for a lecture or two. I strongly believe that students will remember the content if they are experiencing it at the same time as reading about it.

At my home department, I have arranged to give a talk about my teaching sabbatical and my experiences at UCLA. Several of my colleagues have already shown interest in hearing about my experiences and applying themselves, and I am confident this will spark further interest and inspire others to apply. Additionally, we have a blog at University West, and I will write about my experience in the February edition. I also plan to contact the International Office at University West and ask if I can contribute to their work in any way.

Challenges and Recommendations

Finding housing in LA was the biggest challenge for me, as it was more time-consuming and difficult than I had anticipated. LA consists of different cities, each with varying rules and laws concerning subletting, which can be difficult to navigate. For example, in some cities, you are not allowed to sublet unless you are living on the premises. As a result, guesthouses in someone's backyard are common, but apartments are harder to find. Additionally, housing offered on platforms like Craigslist or privately may not be legally permitted, and you could end up renting illegally. Across LA, there are also limits on how many days per year owners are allowed to sublet. I found that many of my inquiries were turned down because they were for too many days and toward the end of the year. However, four months is too short for a standard short-term lease. In the end, I lived in three different places: one I found on Craigslist, one through a colleague, and one through Airbnb. My partner joined me in October. On the positive side, this allowed us to experience living in three different parts of LA—sometimes closer to the beach, other times closer to West LA (Beverly Hills, Hollywood, Downtown). However, it was also tedious to move around frequently, and we never truly settled.

My department at UCLA did not offer support in this process. LA is vast, and without prior knowledge of its cities, areas, or distances to UCLA, it can be overwhelming. I recommend asking your contact person where most of your colleagues live, and if you don't have a car, look up bus lines and stops. I don't have a driver's license, and getting around LA without a car is possible, but public transportation is time-consuming. Uber/Lyft can also get expensive if you live far from campus. Additionally, housing in LA is pricey, so expect to pay more than you would in Sweden for a lower standard.

I would also recommend finding out whether you need to take any vaccines as a teaching staff member and make an informed decision about whether you want to get them—and, if possible, get them in Sweden. I advise starting your preparations early and asking a lot of questions. Lastly, take the time to really think about what *you* want out of this experience. There is so much to do and so many to meet, and it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking you have to do everything to “maximize” your experience. We all have different motivations, aims and personalities—you do you.