



National University of Singapore

STINT Teaching Sabbatical Fall 2017

Final Report

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I spent the fall semester 2017 at the Department of English Language and Literature (ELL) at The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at The National University of Singapore (NUS). NUS is Singapore's largest and oldest university, with approximately 40 000 students. At ELL I was responsible for one graduate course on European cinema.

### **Preparation and planning**

My contacts at ELL, professor John Richardson, administrators Angeline Ang and Susanna Lam, were very helpful in the initial phase of the preparation. At first I was mainly concerned with the arrangements for my daughter's schooling, and even with such matters the administrative contacts Susanna Lam and Angeline Ang were helpful and answered all my questions.

Via email John Richardson suggested that I should be in charge of one of the available film courses at the department. After a discussion on the contents of the courses I opted for a course titled *Narration, narrative and auteur*, a module on master level on narrative structure and style in film. Even if the course was already listed as a module in the course catalogue I was free to develop the content and examination according to my own interests and ideas.

During this initial phase we also planned my first visit to Singapore, the planning trip in spring 2017. We made a schedule for my days at NUS including attending a film history lecture and meetings with some of my future colleagues. In dialogue with these colleagues I decided to focus on European film for my module. I was informed that the other film courses did not cover European film and European film is also in line with my research interests.

During the planning trip I was also offered to stay at the university residence Kent Vale, a residence with serviced apartments that guest lecturers and researchers at NUS are offered to rent during their temporal employment at the university.

I also scheduled a meeting with teachers and administrative staff at my daughter's French-English school to discuss the practicalities of the enrolment.

The planning trip gave me a clear idea about how to develop the course and what was expected from me as a teacher. I did not have much time to plan my course in detail before arrival in Singapore, but I did prepare the general outline, a course description, a list of readings and a list of films for screenings.

## **Tasks and responsibilities**

My main task at the department was to develop, teach and grade the module *Narration, narrative and auteur*, a graduate course on master level with 29 enrolled students. The teaching was organized in weekly seminars of three hours per week. In addition to the seminars I organized seven film screenings of films that we analyzed in detail.

My ambition was to use the time productively by exploring pedagogical methods and new forms examination. As final exam, I offered the students the option of making a video essay instead of a traditional written essay. This was a learning process also for me, since I have no experience of using video essay production in my teaching. The extended teaching time at NUS compared to an equivalent course in Sweden also gave me the possibility to include more close analyses of films in the lectures compared to what I usually do.

I was also responsible for the grading of the course according to a complex system in two different scales combined to a final grade in a scale from A+ to F. The grading procedures also required separate grades for all the students' activities (from class participation and oral presentation to final exam).

Overall I am satisfied with the result. My 'experiment' with the video essay went well and the student performed very well during the course and in the final exam. After the complicated grading process I was also happy to see that my students had given me very positive feedback in the evaluation.

In addition to the teaching, I also participated in seminars and lectures at the university. There are many open lectures on different topics, and also research seminars at the department. I attended a few pedagogical lectures on new teaching methods and research seminars on topics of interest for my research or teaching.

## **Comparison NUS and LNU**

In this section I will compare a variety of aspects in the teaching and learning environment at my host department ELL at NUS with the department of Film and Literature at Linnaeus University. The differences can be about more general differences between Swedish and Singaporean universities, or between the teaching in the humanities in Sweden compared to Singapore. Some of the differences are only due to the specificities of the department of Film and Literature at Linnaeus compared to ELL at NUS, aspects that are not representative for

Sweden on a more general level (for instance the dominance of online courses at my home department).

### Teaching methods

The teaching methods at NUS are fairly traditional with lectures combined with more interactive tutorials or seminars. At my department at Linnaeus University most students are so called 'distance students' taking online-courses. This means that the development of digital pedagogical tools is more important at my home department than at ELL.

### Contact time

At ELL the students have much more contact time (lectures, seminars or consultation) with their teachers compared to my home department, approximately 12-15 hours per week at NUS compared to approximately 4-5 hours per week for a campus course at my department at Linnaeus University. The comparatively low number of contact hours is not specific for Linnaeus University or my department but characterizes courses in the humanities and in the social sciences in Sweden in general.

### Grading

The grading at NUS is more exact than at Linnaeus University. At my home department we use the VG-G-U scale while in Singapore the more differentiated grading scale of A+ to F is used in combination with a scale for marks that is even more differentiated (1-25 or 1-100). Moreover, in Singapore all components of a course are graded according to a percentage indicating the impact on the final grade. However, at NUS there are no grading criteria, at least not in the same formalized manner as in the Swedish course syllables. Instead, for most graduate courses the grades are regulated according to a predetermined 'bell-curve'.

### Evaluation

Course evaluation is more important at NUS compared to Linnaeus University. Students evaluate the course and the teacher's performance through a complex form with many questions resulting in diagrams and a 'grade' for the teacher's performance on a scale from 1-5. The result of the evaluations can influence the teacher's individual salary as well as her or his tenureship. At NUS most students fill out their course evaluations, which is far from being the case at my home department where only a small percentage of the students participate in evaluations.

### Flexibility

At NUS courses and educational programs are less flexible than in Sweden. In Singapore there are no resits for every exam, which is the case in Sweden. Also, at my home department in Sweden we have developed a wide range of online part-time courses suitable for students who work or have children. At ELL there is no such development towards a more flexible courses or educational programs.

### Students

My students at NUS were more hardworking, attentive and disciplined than my Swedish students usually are. They were equally creative, independent and open-minded as my Swedish students usually are. My Swedish students are not lazy but often busy with work or other activities and therefore sometimes less dedicated to their courses. My students at NUS were all from Singapore but from different cultural and ethnic background. In Sweden I have more international students. Compared to my Swedish students they were also younger.

### Censorship and openness

In film and media studies questions of freedom of speech and media censorships are important also in the everyday practice of teaching. At the university I sensed that teachers and scholars had to navigate between a respect of Singapore's restricted media censorship concerning issues of religion, race and sexuality and the aim of maintaining an open intellectual environment. It was not a problem for me to show the films that I had chosen for the course but I would not have the same freedom of selecting films as in Sweden.

### **Important lessons**

In this section I will develop on what I have learned as a teacher from the STINT teaching sabbatical in Singapore. The most important lessons were not primarily due to the specificity of the NUS' learning and teaching environment but due to the specific work conditions of the teaching sabbatical program as a break from my 'multitasking' regular work. The STINT teaching sabbatical gave the opportunity to spend almost all my work time on teaching one single course. These working conditions are radically different from my regular situation at Linnaeus with daily meetings, research seminars and administrative or organizational matters. The focus on teaching only gave me the opportunity to experiment with examination and

teaching methods and develop new forms of assignments. In the first part of the section I will discuss the new examination forms that I have developed. In the second part I will focus on what have learned from the different teaching and learning environment that ELL at NUS compared to my home department. In this part, I will discuss the differences between the host department and home department listed above and develop on what I have learned from these differences.

### Teaching the video essay

The video essay is probably the most important multimodal or intermedial form of academic publishing that is developing in the fields of film, audiovisual media and visual arts. A video essay is basically a compilation film with a voice over that presents an analysis of films or other forms of visual art artifacts. It is a kind of hybrid of a subjective and self-reflexive documentary film (often referred to as film essay) and an academic PowerPoint-presentation. At my department we have discussed the importance of including teaching on video essays in our courses for quite some time, but due to other priorities and lack of time it has not been done. The STINT teaching sabbatical gave me the perfect opportunity to develop teaching about the video essay. As mentioned above, I offered the students the option to make their final essay in either a conventional written form or as a video essay. The video essay format was as new to the students as it was to me. No other teacher at NUS had offered them the opportunity to make a video essay instead of a written text. To prepare them for this filmic form of academic essay, I included two seminars about how to construct an analysis in form of a film instead of a written text. In preparation of these seminars and in order to be able to give the students individual consultation on their work I had to make video essays myself and study a number of video essays closely. In class we analyzed video essays made by students, scholars and filmmakers together, we discussed problems and advantages of different stylistic and analytical choices.

The result of the video essay experiment was very positive. More than half of the students in the group chose to make a video essay instead of a written text and the quality of films was impressive, also when comparing with films made by professional scholars and filmmakers. Their films also helped me in further understanding of the difficulties of using audiovisual tools in research and what kind of knowledge these tools can give us.

Moreover, the video essay experiment gave me a concrete understanding of how the knowledge of the generation born in the digital age can be used in teaching. Their everyday experience of filmmaking and editing does not make them specialists of how to

make academic analytical films, but with guidance of how to structure an analysis they can contribute to the development of alternative forms of publishing in the new research environment of digital humanities.

Using the video essay as option for the final exam also formed my lectures in a new way. In order to inspire the students on how to use audiovisual communication in film analysis I structured my lectures in part as 'live' video essays with close analyses of individual films and with many film image slides (moving or still). A 90 minutes lecture was often prepared in a presentation with over 100 slides, most of them with images from one single film. This lecture style is not entirely different from how I usually teach in Sweden but I definitely took the close analysis of the visual language of film further compared to how I usually prepare my lectures.

### Time and space to teaching and learning

In this part, I will move on to what I have learned from the specific learning and teaching conditions at NUS. From the differences and similarities listed above I would like to single out two important aspects that are worth to reflect on for pedagogical improvement of teaching and learning at my department and in the humanities in Sweden in general.

First, from my experience, at ELL the concrete interaction in the classroom with the students is made visible when pedagogical quality is evaluated. In Sweden we tend to neglect the concrete activities in classroom and instead foreground the pedagogical activities around the teaching (course development, digital innovation and internationalization). In Singapore, the quality of teaching is measured primarily through students' evaluations with detailed questions on specific aspects of the teaching skills, and also with pedagogical awards for 'best teacher of the department' and suchlike. I am not sure that these methods of measurement of pedagogical quality would be suitable in the educational environment of my home department but I think that it is important to give more attention to the actual teaching task in the classroom when pedagogy is evaluated. The question is why Swedish universities give 'points' as an indication of quality only for research when so many university scholars spend most of their working hours time with classroom activities? This is a question that I have asked myself many times before the STINT sabbatical but my stay in Singapore gave my reflections on the matter a new dimension.

The second aspect that I would like single out among the differences and similarities between ELL and my home department is the differences of what is required from the students. At ELL and NUS students have, as mentioned, about three times as much

‘contact time’ (lectures, seminars, consultation) with their teachers compared to my home department (and Swedish courses and programs in the humanities in general). In addition to the time they spend attending lectures and seminars the Singaporean students are also required to read an extensive amount of articles and book and prepare a range of assignments. This means that a student at ELL is required to study at least 40 hours a week for a full time course (for the ambitious ones aiming for an A much more). My course was one of four parallel courses for my students, and the three hours per week lecture required about 10-12 hours of my students’ time.

From a Swedish perspective of the humanities and social sciences the challenge is to schedule full time activities of 40 hours per week to students taking courses with 4-5 hours contact time per week. This problem is, of course, not primarily pedagogical issue but a question of resources but it is important to stress to what extent differences due to resources and priorities have impact on the pedagogy and the quality of teaching. Notably, my Swedish students do not strike me more independent than my Singaporean students when it comes to reading and preparing for the lectures. On the contrary it seems like the extended amount of contact time made the students more apt for studying at home. My guess is that distribution of contact time and reading/preparing assignments time is better adjusted in Singapore to develop independence.

### **Future projects**

My experience from Singapore will influence my teaching practice as well as development of pedagogical projects at my department. In addition to planned pedagogical projects and teaching practices I have also initiated collaboration with a colleague at ELL for one of the courses at our department.

### The video essay in teaching and research

In the spring term of 2018 I will continue to develop the use of the video essay in two courses. The first course is on Swedish and Scandinavian cinema for international students, and the second is a partly practice based course on advanced level on the video as research tool. In the first course I include the video essay in a similar way as I did in in Singapore, and in the second I develop the video essay practice further. The second course is also developed in collaboration with the Academy of Valand’s practice based filmmaking program in Gothenburg. My experience in Singapore of using the video essay as final exam will help me



a great deal in the development of this course. I am also aiming to produce more elaborated video essays myself for my own research.

#### Measure quality of teaching

As member of the pedagogical committee of my department one of my duties is to develop strategies to improve the pedagogical environment at our department. I will certainly build on my experience from Singapore in order to make teaching skills more visible. I am not sure that the learning and teaching environment at our department would benefit from a similar course evaluation system as in Singapore but there are other methods of measuring quality in the classroom teaching practice that can be put into practice. A concrete activity that I have planned is to invite a specialist at such methods of measuring quality in classroom practice of teaching to our department.

#### Schedule full time activities

As mentioned above, the problem of Swedish ‘lazy’ students who do not read the required texts and who do not prepare properly before the lectures is mainly a question about resources and a consequence of the fact that the students do not have enough contact time with their teachers. However, there are pedagogical adjustments to make also with our limited resources. One simple adjustment is to schedule full time activities in the course guides’ of every course. I have already made such detailed schedule for my students before, but the STINT sabbatical has been an important reminder of the importance of such meticulousness in the communication with my students. A detailed description of estimated time for activities such as reading, group discussions or preparing assignments is also useful for the teacher. It can give the teacher a concrete idea about how much work we can demand from our students in a specific course.

#### Collaboration

Since we have many online courses at my department ‘guest lectures’ across the globe are neither expensive nor complicated. So far, I have planned one Skype-interview with Phd-student Phoebe Pua Xin Yi, specialized in Asian cinema from a gender perspective. Her research perspectives suit our courses on world cinema and we will include the interview in the lectures at the course platform.

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