

Teaching Cinema Studies in Singapore: Report from a semester at Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, as a STINT-fellow within the Excellence-in-Teaching program 2011

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Introduction

When I was given the opportunity to apply for the Excellence-in-Teaching program in the autumn of 2010 there was no indication that STINT was negotiating with universities outside of the US to receive stipends. The news that I was welcome to spend a semester teaching at a University in South East Asia came as quite a shock. Though I naturally had to adjust my expectations of what the stipend would involve, I found the prospect of exploring what it could be like teaching in a university in Singapore exiting. Frankly, I wasn't sure what to expect or how this experience would enhance my qualifications as a lecturer in higher education. However, I thought it interesting that Singapore was close to China, and very different to both China and Sweden in terms of political system, economic status and cultural heritage.

In hindsight, I think the most valuable part of my experience at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) was becoming aware of the differences in reaching out to and apprehending ones place in the world (ie processes of internationalization) between my home university, Örebro University (ÖU), and NTU. These differences fall back on a set of external conditions, not least economic, that are not easily effected, yet it was inspiring to view the world from a different stand point to what I was used to in my day to day work and to try to understand how my subject area, Cinema Studies, is relevant from (rather than in) this local yet cosmopolitan context.

NTU has a faculty that is much more international than I have experienced anywhere in Sweden; it also has a student body with a high number of international students in graduate and post-graduate programs. The university offers several joint-programs with foreign universities and at WKWSCI there are opportunities for students to travel as a part of course work as well as in student exchange programs. I was impressed to hear that the goal for sending undergraduates abroad was set at 70%! During the time of my stay at WKWSCI the school had two visiting guest professors from American universities. Furthermore, the school is generous in offering their faculty opportunity to participate in several conferences per year, abroad.

Another important yet perhaps more intangible effect that the program has had on me doesn't relate to the specific country or university I visited as a teaching guest. Rather, it relates to the opportunity the stipend has given to spend time, energy and care on the teaching assignment; on giving feedback to the students, producing relevant teaching materials, trying out new techniques and talking about teaching with other STINT-stipend colleagues. This is a rare luxury - in light of the heavy work-load for lecturers in Swedish higher education.

Preparations and the Question of my Status

On a short scouting trip to Singapore in April 2012, I was received by NTU provost and Prof. Er Meng Hwa, the head of Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information (WKWSCI) Dr. Ben Detenber and the head of the Division for Broadcast and Cinema Studies (DBS), A/P Adam Knee. A/P Adam Knee arranged for me to sit in on two seminars for different modules and teachers which I much appreciated. I also took the opportunity to talk to a Swedish exchange student about his experience. Besides preparations related to work, I had a look at an apartment on campus the like of which I was offered to rent for my coming stint, which was very convenient.

Being a pioneer for the program at the university and also given the open nature of the program itself, it wasn't entirely clear what my status would be or how the relationship between WKWSCI/NTU and myself should work. Ben Detenber and Adam Knee suggested that I teach a 4 credit module introducing Cinema Studies. I was also invited to present my research at the research seminar at WKWSCI. Concerning my status, I boarded the WKWSCI teaching fleet as a part-time teacher which was not entirely satisfactory given the objective of the program, to enable the stipend to immerse him- or herself in the work place and its day-to-day labor. As a part-time teacher I had limited access to the NTU intranet, and information about fx staff recreation and short teacher training courses at CELT (edUtorium) passed me by. It also made it difficult for me (and my family) to register for activities on campus, whether they were open lectures and research seminars, cultural or sports activities.

Teaching Assignment and Activities

My main assignment was the preparation, teaching and examination of the 4 credit module introducing Cinema Studies (COM253) mentioned earlier. I inherited a syllabus from the previous teacher and modified it only slightly: I exchanged the main textbook for another that I find is easier to work with (more skills-oriented yet less cultural critical); I added a set of learning outcomes for the students of the course to make my expectations of the course aims in terms of learning outcome as clear as possible; I furthermore introduced a "discussion leader"-function as a revolving group function among the students during tutorials. Each tutorial started with a presentation of a student group project, each group performed twice during the course. The "discussion leaders" at the tutorial were responsible for the discussion that was meant to follow upon the presentation. The purpose with a "discussion leader"-function was in this case

two-fold. First, it is a tool to motivate the students to listen carefully to the presentation, and also to practice giving feedback, assuming responsibility for a group discussion, and in raising questions for discussion. Second, it is also a tool for the teacher in his/her appreciation of the participatory part of the continuous assessment. Yet another modification of the syllabus concerned the final exam. When I realized I could book an exam format that involved the individual use of computers I seized the opportunity to try a skills-based assessment in which the students view a 10 minute film clip and perform an instant analysis of the film using concepts and techniques they have been exposed to throughout the course.

The course COM253 was scheduled with one joint film screening and lecture per week (to be held within 3, 5 hrs) and two one hour tutorials during which I met with half of the class once a week. Thirty six students were registered for the course, of which two were foreign students.

I learned that the credits were tied to the hours per week of instruction when I asked that two films would be screened per week - one in conjunction with the lecture and the other geared towards the tutorial – and was told that this is not possible.

Besides teaching COM253 I held a presentation at the WKWSCI weekly research seminar in September and attended a number of WKWSCI seminars. I participated in the faculty meetings at WKWSCI and I also attended research presentations and discussions at the School of Humanities and Social Science (HSS).

A Comparison of Educational Structure

ÖU and NTU are both “young” universities; ÖU (17 000 students) acquired status as university in 1999 and NTU (33 500 students) in 1991. Sweden has a population of roughly 9 million and ÖU competes for Swedish language students with around 30 colleges and universities. In Singapore 4 public (autonomous) universities and 5 polytechnic schools cater to a population of roughly 5.18 million. Being English-speaking, NTU also has the potential to accept students from an international community.

Engineering and business are the two areas in which NTU has considerable size and expertise. Science, healthcare and the humanities are represented with a college each and are important to the five areas that the new five year strategic plan has in focus: sustainability, healthcare, new media, the best of the East and West, and innovation. ÖUs heritage involves strength in the humanities and social sciences and is currently in a process of concentrating resources to professional, yet research-based educational programs. Such programs in law, medicine, business and education are often mentioned in ÖU’s PR.

WKWSCI is one of 3 schools that belong to the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) at NTU. HASS has a total of approximately 5 000 students. Of these, around 1 200 students are found at WKWSCI; 700 students are enrolled in the undergraduate program working towards a Bachelor degree in Communications, the others are students in graduate programs and

what is called “research programs”. The overwhelming majority of the master students (500) belong to a category of students that go by the name of “course work graduates”. Around 50 students include research training in their education and are thereby known as “research students”, including also post-graduate students.

The educational structure at NTU is different to the system at ÖU, as is the number and distribution of students over the different levels of education. At ÖU, the subject area of Media- and Communication Studies (MCS) belongs to the School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences (HumES). 300 full time student grades were passed at the Media- and Communication Studies undergraduate and graduate courses (mostly within but a few outside of MCS degree programs) in 2011. Only approximately 45 of these belong to the graduate level. ÖU hosts about 10 students accepted to a MCS doctoral program. Master programs have not yet become an assimilated part of the educational structure at HumES, ÖU.

Other differences concern the program structure and if it encourages specialization within a subject area or an educational ideal based on generalized knowledge. WKWSCI offers several concentrations: Journalism; Broadcast & Cinema Studies; Advertising; Public Relations; Communication Policy & Research; Inter-Disciplinary. I would also like to point out that WKWSCI offers traditional theoretical courses in communications, informatics, media and cultural studies, as well as quite a wide range of courses aimed at training practical skills. This aligns with the school’s “Vision and mission” statement. Its primary mission is: “to meet the demand in Singapore and the region for well-trained personnel to staff the media industry and information services.” Becoming a “premier research institution” is a secondary mission. (<http://www.wkwsci.ntu.edu.sg/AboutWKWSCI/Pages/MissionandVision.aspx>)

At NTU the bachelor degree programs were “opened” in 2011 to give students a greater choice of electives to be included within a program (30 % of the program), and hence the option to broaden their knowledge base.

With the undergraduate program Digital Media Design as an exception, the bachelor degree programs at MCS, ÖU in PR, in Media and Communications, and in Film require the students to include three prescribed semesters of study within their main subject, involving knowledge progression for every course as well as research training (dissertation). The rest of the program time (50 %) is open for electives. However, the number and subject range of the electives are in fact limited if the student chooses to take them at ÖU, and there are few courses that offer training in practical skills within journalism, broadcasting, film making, etc.

A Comparison of Educational Practice

The academic calendar stretches over approximately the same time period at ÖU and at NTU. The semesters were however managed differently. At ÖU a semester is always 20 weeks long. The student is expected to put in 40 hours of work per week with only Public Holidays reducing the hours. At NTU the second semester of 2011 spanned 18 weeks and the first semester of 2012

17 weeks. The first 2 weeks of the semester is a test period for the students, an “add-drop” period during which they can try out a course and have the opportunity to switch to another. There is also a midterm, week-long break and three weeks at the end of the semester reserved for revision and examination, during which there was no scheduled classes.

It is common practice at HumES, ÖU to offer courses that occupy a full semester. Three or four modules are included in the semester-long course and are studied consecutively rather than parallel in time. At NTU the student chooses modules in smaller units (3 or 4 credits) that run on low gear throughout a semester period, ie a student juggles three or four parallel courses during one semester. From a student perspective this system gives more room for choice. From a teaching perspective the benefits with this system is perhaps the set schedule offering stability and a way of regulating and comparing expected work-load (for both students and teacher). I also appreciated that learning is allowed to take time, that there is a sense of accumulation over time, as there are problems and concepts that need time to “gel”. The longevity of a course module gave a sense of progression *within* it. Furthermore, a set schedule reduces the time a teacher has to spend on course design. On the other hand, the rigidity of the set schedule can be understood as a drawback, limiting the pedagogical options that are open for the teacher. When I teach a five week concentrated module at MCS ÖU, I can create a course set-up that is especially designed to fit the syllabus (that is set once per year). Also, I can adjust the schedule as the course progresses if I find it necessary to do so; change teaching strategy, or simply add an extra seminar or film.

For the COM 253 Cinema Studies module I taught at NTU, the time reserved for lectures depended on the length of the film being screened and often landed on slightly more than an hour per week. I have been in the habit of performing 2 to 3 hour lectures (with leg-stretchers and coffee breaks interspersed) and was initially a bit worried about how to manage with so little time with the students. As it turned out, this was not a problem. I came to appreciate the much shorter format. Concentrating a lecture to a few points, (explanations, exercises and or examples) kept the students alert and made the lectures more enjoyable for me as they had to be more minutely planned and were more of a challenge. I also experimented with my lectures by dividing them into parts with different modes of performance and address. For example, I’d start with an introduction listing the points to be made, followed by a monologue (both with slides), then I’d show a film clip, sometimes I’d introduce an interactive exercise (using the whiteboard to keep track of its results), and finally I’d round off with a conclusion/summary.

I also appreciated the routine with weekly half-class tutorials during which the students presented group work and had some time for discussion. Shifting the focus from teacher monologues to peer-to-peer student learning combined with interaction with a teacher is excellent. In the best of worlds, the number of students in a tutorial group would be restricted to around a dozen. The size of the group makes a difference when it comes to students assuming responsibility for the discussion, coming prepared, as well as for the teacher in controlling the discussion and assessing the students’ participation. Furthermore, the tutorial rooms would be set up to facilitate discussion, in a manner where the people present face each other.

A Comparison of Procedures for Student Assessment

At MCS, ÖU a variety of methods for examination are used. The learning objectives of a course will typically include different kinds of knowledge that can be expressed or demonstrated in different ways, for example in a variety of written formats, through individual and group exercises, oral presentations, discussions, multi-question short answer tests and more traditional scheduled exams; whatever the combination of student activities that are made part of the course work, each will typically be assessed in a separate and autonomous examination. For each such examination, the student can fail, pass or pass with distinction. Should the student fail, he/she will be given the opportunity to pass the examination in question in a new test offered to the student shortly after the first one, and should he/she fail again a third chance is offered during the summer break. The separate grades are added up as a final course mark, again with the possibility to fail, pass or pass with distinction. The assessment should (of course) match the course objectives as specified in the syllabus, and the grading procedure (*betygskriterier*) also has to be specified in a document made accessible to the students.

A good thing about this system is – again – the flexibility it allows for the teacher to tailor the assessment of the students' learning and to use it as a tool to encourage students to work according to different methods of learning. In the process, the student learns to shift methods of learning and to develop different kinds of presentational skills.

Campus and fika

The NTU campus is situated a bit “off” in the small country and city of Singapore. Its campus is lush, spacious and quiet - perhaps a bit too quiet. I would miss having somewhere to hang out in the evenings. The interact events organized for staff was a great initiative! It gave me and my family a chance to meet people in a relaxed milieu.

I recommend introducing “fika” at WKWSCI. In periods there is simply no time to eat lunch or drink a coffee outside of one's office, I know. However, there are many gains to be had if faculty members have the opportunity to regularly have informal meetings during which to bond, to catch up on what is going on at the work place, to maintain an ongoing internal dialogue and a sense of “working community”. Coming from a culture in which people at work gather for a 15 minute morning coffee, for lunch, and again for a 15 minute afternoon coffee, I found it difficult to feel connected to my colleagues at WKWSCI where there were no regular, informal get-togethers.

Finally, I have to mention the restaurants on campus. The many canteens with their variety of cuisines and subsidized prices were an everyday treat!

Thank you STINT, ÖU and NTU for this experience.