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Ambitions and Freedom

- A Report From a Semester at the CUHK,
Hong Kong

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This is the final report to STINT from my teaching experiences at the CUHK, Hong Kong, where I taught from September to December 2013, as a fellow of STINTS Excellence in Teaching - program.

Introduction

As a STINT-fellow, I spent the autumn semester of 2013 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (the CUHK). This report was originally written in the form of added notes during my stay in Hong Kong, and not as one single document afterwards. The notes were, of course, edited and restructured before the report was finalized. On one hand side, the text does justice to my understandings, interpretations and feelings of a certain time because of this. On the other hand, it doesn't form a coherent whole (in substance, though, due to the editing, it does in form) where I interpret events with the benefit of hindsight. Put in the terms of hermeneutics, the focus is on the parts of the hermeneutic circle, rather than the circle (entity) itself (I will however try to sum things up in the end).

Pre-plannings and First Visit

My planning for the semester abroad started almost as soon as I received the news that I had been endowed a place at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, just before Christmas 2012. After all, which Swede could refrain himself from looking at air tickets to subtropical Hong Kong in the dead of winter? I also, in due course, received correspondence from the CUHK and finalized the dates for the planning journey as soon as possible. Though perhaps mainly driven by a wish to get the adventure started I strongly believe in the strategy to make the most of the planning journey – at the time in December, it seemed to be far away (I was supposed to travel in late March) but when one is trying to coordinate one's own schedule at home with meetings at a big university such as the CUHK, hotel bookings and air tickets, three months isn't that long at all.

I also made an effort to try to get some grip of the education system at the CUHK in general and the courses of the GPA-department in particular. Somehow, it is always difficult to get a good grip of a new context (intellectual, physical or structural) before one has actually experienced it personally, but I suppose the initial readings helped to speed up the process later on, since I already had a lot of information.

On Friday, March 15th 2013 I left Gothenburg for my first journey to Hong Kong, with a return ticket for Sunday, March 24th. Before booking the trip I had been rather bewildered about how long to stay. I knew I would have to decide where to live

during the autumn, and what course to teach, but apart from that? Would it be a lot of the infamous red tape? Would I have to stay on long enough to sign papers for accommodation and teaching? I also assumed that there would be a lot of meetings of the Swedish models, where endless discussions are held and I assumed that there would be discussions of the “how-do-you-feel-about-it” kind. Well, I assumed wrongly. Well before my arrival, the eminent administration for arriving teachers and students (AcademicLink) had set up meetings with the department and organized a proposal for accommodation.

As a matter of fact, the two meetings were rather two brief encounters. First, I met with an AcademicLink representative, who took me on a tour through campus and showed me the flat proposed for my accommodation. This took about an hour. Secondly, I met with a representative from the department, who provided me with the curricula of two courses they had thought I might, given my background, be interested in teaching, and was given the instructions to decide and let them know within a week which one I would prefer. This meeting took 45 minutes.

There were no other planned activities for my stay. This leads to two questions: Would more meetings, more activities be necessary? And, ultimately, is it really possible to defend travelling 18 hours one way for this? My answer to the questions are, in order, no, and yes. How much information, and contacts, one wants before the actual teaching begins is probably a question of personal disposition; personally I am inclined to trust that things will be sorted out and that information needed can be gained at a later stage, if necessary. The second point, that it is worth spending a week in Hong Kong despite the fact that accommodation as well as contacts with the department easily could be arranged over e-mail, needs some comments. When one is going to spend no less than four months in a foreign city, teaching new courses in a new context, it is, I feel, of importance to have some kind of first – hand knowledge of the place in question. The week enabled me to learn to navigate in Hong Kong in general and the campus in particular. It enabled me to get a feeling for the campus. When I arrived in August, everything wasn't new, as it would have been, if I hadn't come in March. I believe that this of great value to most people.

Teaching

The main responsibility of mine was to teach the course GPAD 2120 – Public Organization and Management. The course deals with topics that I'm familiar with – I've taught courses to the same end in Sweden and Public Administration topics have also played a role in my research. In other words, I did not worry about the actual content of the course, with which I was more than familiar. It is quite another thing when it comes to the other parts of being a good teacher – what about the students, would they understand English in a sufficient way? Would they have adequate previous knowledge? Would my examples work? Would my teaching style, not using Power Point or other technical advices, work?

Teaching a course at the CUHK is quite different from the Swedish equivalent. At the CUHK, the semester is 13 weeks (after which all most final examinations take place) and all courses run from the beginning to the end of each semester. Students normally enroll to several courses, sometimes as many as 8 or 9. Every course (on an undergraduate level) has one lecture (2*45 minutes) every week, and one tutorial (90 minutes) every second week. The tutorial is, off course, repetitive and no more than 15 students can sign up for a specified time slot. In courses with many students, this means several tutorials. Had it not been for the Teaching Assistants, TAs, the teacher would be rather busy teaching.

But the TAs of the CUHK carry a good deal of the burden of each course. First, they organize all practical matters and make sure the course runs smoothly from an administrative point of view. They email instructions to students, remind teachers if there is something that needs to be done, they keep records of examinations and hand out graded examinations. Second, they are responsible for the tutorials and after the teacher has decided what should be done in them, they frankly don't have to think about them again. Third, they help grading exams to the extent wished by teacher (and within limits). Fourth, they are responsible for the student contacts, which means that teachers only get contacted if the TA can't provide an answer (and then normally by the TA, not by students). In other words, they have their resemblance of one of T.S. Elliot's famous cats, Skimblehanks, the Railway Cat, who supervises everything and everyone on the Scottish overnight train making sure nothing goes wrong. In short, a teacher at the CUHK has to lecture for two hours per course per week, to do some grading and to prepare the course.

Of course, being here to learn, I wanted to be more involved in the course. First of all, I took responsibility for half of the tutorials myself, and participated in most of the tutorials my TA was responsible for as well. She on her side participated in all lectures and in my tutorials too. This provided me with a very valuable potential to ask questions about my way to teach, compared to what she would regard as “normal” at the department. Secondly, for natural reasons, I wanted to grade the exams myself to be able to compare strengths and weaknesses of the students compared to what I normally encounter in similar courses in Sweden.

At Home and Abroad: Two Contexts Compared

There are several things that deserve to be highlighted as but it should be stated already now that few, if any, of those traits were any surprises in the real sense; perhaps the only surprise was that there were no surprises.

One natural point of comparison is geography vis-à-vis topic. It seems clear that political science in Hong Kong differs much more from, say, economics or business at the same university than from political science in Gothenburg or University West. This goes for most factors: the way students define themselves (“we are learning to think, not, as economy students, only to repeat”), the way teachers dress (less formal), the way teaching is viewed (it is important to be a good teacher, but it is taken for granted that you are that, and no-one bothers with teaching theory), the relation between students and teachers (rather informal, but few if any students challenge the authority of the teacher as the most knowledgeable one). I organized two discussions with Swedish exchange students, studying other topics during the semester, and it is clear that they didn’t share my experiences to any greater degree (save the ability of Chinese students to read an enormous amount of literature).

Students tend to be rather similar everywhere. Some are more ambitious than others; some are more intelligent; some are more lazy; some are more friendly, and when it comes to this, I really can’t say that the actual levels differ much from the Swedish system – with one significant exception. When it comes to reading the literature and writing assignments, the students are self-disciplined to an extent almost unthinkable at a Swedish university. In my mid-term exam, with multiple choice questions, maximum score was 23, and the vast majority received over 20 points. In a similar exam in Sweden, few would receive over 20 and a good deal would hanker around

the limit for pass (50%) and perhaps 30% will fail. As a matter of fact, no student failed in any exam during the course, or came even close to failing. They all provided perfectly sensible pieces of work, in exams testing knowledge as the above mentioned mid-term exam, as well as in exams testing their understanding or analytical skills. This is the more impressive since there is no such thing as a re-exam. Two things must be said though: first of all, in the light of my earlier experience of Chinese students and my general understanding of Chinese culture, it is hardly surprising. Secondly, due to the very limited number of students accepted at the three or four major educational institutions in Hong Kong that offer Political Science, the completion to get in is much higher and the students I taught are probably among the most successful students leaving high schools. With a population not much smaller than Sweden's, only a few hundred start studying Political Science as compared to several thousands in Sweden. Apart from this they behaved, as I mentioned before, much like students in Sweden. There are late comers; there are people one has to tell off for talking in class; there are students playing with their phones. I was a little surprised, perhaps, that the students interacted to the extent they did. This is similar to Sweden, but my prejudice was that Chinese students are very unwilling to ask questions or have discussions in class.

The teachers on their side, behaved much the same as teachers in political science in Sweden. There is no sitting room for teachers, so there are few if any coffee breaks, and teachers don't interact to the same extent as at home. But, there was the monthly happy hours event, when the department invited all teachers, Ph. D. students and master students for food and drink. Often, most teachers would have lunch together, and talk about much the same thing as at home: the students, political questions and the frustration about the universities central administration. But the small chats on a daily basis are lacking and to be able to create such chats would certainly be of great value for creativity in teaching as well as research.

If one is forced to make generalizations, I would focus on their view on knowledge and studies. The view on knowledge and studies was, at least in this group, much more oriented towards a goal than I'm used to at home. The German notion *Bildung*, with all its well discussed implications, played a much lesser role than at home – and then it is said that Sweden compares badly to the US, England or Germany on that score. It is impossible not to connect this to the general culture of the former crown colony: it's lassie fair system, the enormous wealth next door to poverty, the can do – attitude, the focus on success and progress – in short, individuals must to some extent be fostered to view studies at one of several strategies to reach individual

carrier goals. It is obvious that students do a cost – benefit analyze of the cost of the course in relations to the benefits they will get in reaching their goals. Put in the words of Max Weber, they tend to lean towards *Zweckrationalität*, rather than *Wertrationalität* (the English translations goal rationality and value rationality don't cover exactly the same aspects). In no way one should glorify any country when it comes to this, though. To some extent the many discussions in Sweden about *Bildung* are purely rhetorical: lacking resources and institutional arrangements clearly makes it very difficult to transform the rhetoric into action whereas the liberal art inspired colleges, like Morningside, seem to actually keep the *Bildung*-concept at the heart of the process. Perhaps one could say, that the difference is that the rhetoric about those things are closer to reality in the CUHK, whereas in Sweden universities tend to hide reality in Potemkin villages of *Bildung*. It must also be said that I found the *Bildung*-notion very much alive among teachers I met during my stay. At dinners, the discussions would be hard to imagine in many Swedish academic contexts; they would eloquently move from new interpretations of classical English romantic poetry to the situation in Palestine; from the development in China to the influence of German grammar on German thinking; from Chinese literature to Swedish detective stories and so on. In short, the picture is blurred with on the one hand side rather utility-focused students and teachers with wide intellectual interests.

The utility-focus of the students must, however, also be seen in the light of structural circumstances. Many students take between 7 and 10 parallel courses. It goes without saying that no one can focus wholeheartedly on so many courses and it is obvious that this also creates a situation, on an individual level, where students are forced to pay more attention to short-term deadlines than an ongoing learning process, and where students are put in front of trade-offs between different courses and are forced to choose to neglect the parts with the least severe consequences.

Learning from CUHK

It is quite clear that teaching and learning are embedded in their context. Therefore it is in general difficult, or even impossible, to lift out single practices, customs or structures from one context to another. This is true on a system level as well as on an individual level. The discussions in this part are therefore necessarily rather abstract and I do not intend to make a clear difference between what I could implement as a

teacher, what the university could implement or what the system as a whole could implement for the very same reason, even though I sometimes point towards the different levels.

Administration

First and foremost, at the CUHK the relation between the system as a whole (department management, regulations, student unions etc) and the teacher is much more straightforward than the Swedish system: the teacher is there to deliver good teaching, and he or she is left with this responsibility without much control. There are, however, no signs that the Swedish system will turn towards greater confidence in teachers again. I will return to this point later.

The administration is also formidable in a general sense. Things get done, quickly and efficiently with a high degree of accurateness. At first, being used to the Swedish system, I felt a need to double-check, to ask whether things had been done or not and to plan for a case where administration had failed. All totally superfluous concerns. You do not get feed-back from the administration when they have done what you asked, because for what purpose would you need feed-back? They have done it according to your wishes at the time stated, and as a teacher one can focus on teaching instead of being mixed up with administrative matters.

Resources

Another thing is, of course, the different levels of resources. The CUHK as a whole has resources on a level state-funded Swedish universities only can dream of. This doesn't mean that all courses have so much more resources than they do in Sweden, but it means there are ample funding for the different departments and that all departments can afford a proper administration and often TAs for courses. It also means that teachers in general are supposed to teach three two-hour lectures for 26 weeks of the year (at least at the GPA-department) – this makes it quite possible to do your own research and to read research in relevant fields. Perhaps more important it also makes teaching much more fun and leaves enough time to help students in trouble, and it makes sure teachers have enough time to prepare courses and lectures and to feel inspired about teaching. In the Swedish system, far too many teachers are tired and uninspired due to the high quantitative demands of teaching. Again, this is a point that it is hardly worth to dwell on since there are no signs of significant change; rather, due to the absurd goal of rationalization within all of the Swedish civil service, resources are rather decreasing.

Attitude to students: Rise your expectations

As I mentioned students perform enormously much better than at home and are more hard working and disciplined. Since I do not believe that Hong Kong students are born more ambitious the question is what could be done in Sweden to raise the general level. One difficulty is naturally that university education necessarily is based on the earlier stages in education; more about that below. Let us first discuss the situation as it is.

First, students, apparently, can read much more than is usually expected of them – and above all, they can be expected to have memorized it as well as have understood it. Partly, this has to do with the training at earlier stages in the students' educations, but even this acknowledged there is much room for improvement by working systematically with reading skills at universities. A good start would of course be to make sure that the students actually spend their time reading the books, and I think that mid-term exams have an important role to play here. Here, it is quite normal to have an exam half-way through the course with multiple choice question, short answer questions and alike, and it is entirely uncontroversial among teachers and students. Back home, there is always an implicit criticism from other teachers and students, implying that one is interfering with the students' learning processes.

A second thing is that there are few what one would call true emergencies, or unfortunate circumstances preventing students from fulfilling their duties. During this course, one student had to be absent from one tutorial due to a planned operation. He contacted me well in advance, providing me with a written certification from the hospital and a well thought- out compensation. In a normal course in Sweden there are quite often student absent, or students not handing in exams, leading to a much lower part of the students passing than would have been necessary; they probably have the ability to pass but don't hand in on time or don't write the exam. This is so much more confusing, since all exams in Sweden also have a re-exam to make up for this, and also possibilities to write the exam the next time the course is offered. It is possible that this is counterproductive in the sense that it provides students with an excuse and creates a feeling that it doesn't really matter; if I fail this time, I can do it another time; there will always be a new chance.

Everything mentioned above form a coherent whole where there are clear differences between the student groups when it comes to the actual academic performance. As indicated above, this is a difference in cultures leading to differences of attitudes to studies, knowledge, failing and many other things. The

interesting question is of course what could be done to create such a culture at Swedish universities. First of all, the students are part of the Swedish culture long before entering the universities. Probably, it is a combination of earlier education, parents, media and a general culture influencing this and here is not the right place to start discussing those general questions. Rather, when students enter universities, they are part of this culture, and the question is what universities and university teachers, given this, can do. There is, of course, no quick fix, but I don't believe it is impossible to create a more learning-focused culture, either. In short, I believe that the strategy can be described by *explicit demands, piecemeal tasks, rigid structure, focus on reading literature and early start.*

First *explicit demands*: Given the Swedish context, I don't see it as possible just to hand students books telling them to read them. Rather, it is important to communicate much clearer than we normally do, what we expect from their reading: what are they supposed to memorize and why, what are they supposed to understand and how, etc. It is also vital to make notions such as analyze explicit: what do we mean when we say analyze? This is also connected to *piecemeal tasks*. Students seem to have difficulties breaking down major tasks themselves and need help with it. If writing a longer paper, they need shorter deadlines and week-by-week planning, and they need reading assigned for each week or lecture. The *rigid structure* means clear rules that are communicated and stuck to. If there is one exam and one re-exam for a particular element, it is important to stick to it and not make exceptions if students, for one reason or the other, later want to make up for the exam. If a tutorial is compulsory, there should be clear rules as to what counts as an excuse not to take part (such as notes from doctors about illness). The point of this is of course to create a feeling that it all matters; there are not innumerable new chances. The next point, *focus on reading literature*, is the more important since this is the main practice to gain knowledge, insights etc. in any academic system on any level. If students fail here, standards will be very low. There are numerous ways to achieve this, of course, from constantly stressing the importance of reading, to choosing the best material that is available to introducing mid-term exams and to make sure that coming to the lectures isn't nearly enough to pass the courses, by shifting exam question away from what has been explicitly stated during lectures. Finally, I strongly believe that the points discussed must be *introduced early*, in the first course. There is a general idea among many teachers that the step from high schools to universities must be smooth and gradual; I would rather say that students benefit from being kick started.

Structure and freedom

Another thing is the clear structure of the courses: at the CUHK all schedules are centrally planned and can't be influenced by yourself as a teacher. To some extent this is good: it gives a clear structure and students can't complain about too few lectures or tutorials. On the other hand side it is rather problematic, because you can't plan the schedule according to needs of the course. If one, for some reason, would want longer but fewer lectures, you are still stuck with the two hours centrally booked for you. To make the most of the rooms, the schedule stretches from Monday morning to late Friday night – if one would be unlucky, one could have a lecture Friday 6-8 pm.

In the Swedish system, there is another kind of rigid structure that leads to a tradeoff between “rule by law” and course quality in the sense that all regulations about curricula, students right to advance knowledge about exams and literature, and grading procedures increase the predictability for the students, but very often decreases the actual quality. At the CUHK, literature lists are finalized by the teacher, at the beginning of each course. The same goes for the different exams, they do not have to be stated months in advance. I can see that under some circumstances this might be problematic for some students, but it also enables the teachers to make changes mid-course, should it be desired for one reason or the other. The mechanical view of knowledge, that lies behind the Swedish idea of clear goals stated in advance is also rather questionable in itself. This is a system failure in Sweden and needs to be addressed at a system level.

To some extent there is a value conflict between the two notions insofar as that you can't maximize both at the same time. On a system level this needs much more deliberate reflections and explicit principles as to where structure is needed and where freedom is necessary. As yet, it seems to be taken for granted that both can co-exist which often seems very unlikely. This is not just a Swedish problem – the debates in the UK from the 1980s and onwards, the debates in Germany for the last decade and the debates in France at present are examples of this value conflict being a universal phenomenon. The present tenacious focus on structure is, in my own opinion, one of the two or three most damaging practices to Swedish academic life in recent years.

Concluding remarks

In general, the day-to-day business of the teacher in either of the two systems is surprisingly similar. Teachers tend to worry about the same things. Students tend to behave in similar ways during lectures. The courses themselves are extraordinarily similar. Basically the same range of examination forms exist. If one looks a little closer, perhaps searching for differences, one will find them and many of them are mentioned above. And if reflected upon some of the differences are truly important, probably making a lot of difference to the learning process of students, to the ambition of teachers, to the general smoothness of the system.