

“Study what you like and then do what you want!”

- Report from a semester at Williams College, Autumn 2012

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Preparation and planning

In order to prepare for our stay at Williams College, my wife and I traveled to Williamstown in March 2012. At that point we had very useful conversations with several key persons, including my future reference person, head of Comparative Literature, Christopher Bolton and the housing officer Roberta Senecal. The journey to Williamstown gave us a first impression of the small town and it allowed us to make plans concerning schools for our three children (aged 6, 10, 12). Consequently, the planning trip was very useful to us.

Apart from planning for schools, housing and teaching, the preparation of passports, visas and vaccination programs took quite some time, and it is very important to begin as early as possible with these preparations because they can become very real obstacles to either entering the US (visas) or entering schools (vaccinations). To reserve time for visas at the embassy in Stockholm may take up to three months, and the vaccination programs take approximately the same time (for children).

Tasks and responsibilities

My task and responsibility at Williams College was clear: I planned and conducted a class in Comparative Literature. The class consisted of 18 students, and we had more than twenty-five scheduled meetings, several written assignments and visits to museums and film screenings; at the end of the course I graded the students.

Activities during the semester

Teaching my class was my main preoccupation during my stay, but I also spent quite some time observing other classes offered in Comparative Literature and the English Department, as well as faculty meetings and departmental meetings. I also took part in

the biweekly meetings of the PET group, an informal group led by two senior faculty, concentrating on Effective Teaching, mainly directed towards younger and/or new faculty. Furthermore I had time to conduct (a little) research, which resulted in an article on film music in Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island*, which I presented in a keynote lecture in Stockholm in November 2012, which is intended for publication in the British journal *Adaptation*. Below I would like to present a few of the most interesting activities in more detail.

Personal Teaching Experience; students, longer courses, individual course planning, evaluation

My lasting impression of Williams students (here and in the following I am of course generalizing!) is that they are very polite, relatively strategic (they are well aware when and why they should contribute to class) and extremely hardworking. They are intelligent and nice, and they are obviously used to – and not bothered by – maintaining a very clear hierarchical distance between professor and student (resulting in my being addressed as “Professor” or Professor Bruhn, which took some time to get used to!). Being chosen for one of the country's most attractive institutions obviously makes the students a chosen few (so that they are as a matter of course bright, socially competent, etc.), too, but for me the most important trait, in particular as compared to Swedish students, is that they read everything they are asked to read, they hand in well-shaped, well-worked-through assignments in time, and they turn up well-prepared for class. Whereas this is the case for *some* students in my Swedish classes (in Lund and Växjö where I have taught), this is the *general* impression at Williams. The really remarkable thing is that my class was only one out of the four classes a Williams student needs to follow each term.

Another, less positive trait is that the students at Williams seemed scared to fail (in particular the new students, about half of my class) and a little too eager to do what (they think that) the teacher wants them to do. Creativity, passion, grand (or small) new ideas, were unfortunately a bit rare among my students; I am well aware, though, that the responsibility of this falls upon me as a teacher, too. Many teachers I talked to described it like this: Williams students are phenomenal at doing what they are asked, but they need to have their targets clearly defined.

Another major difference in my teaching experience (as compared to Sweden) is the great value of the longer courses that Williams offers. Instead of breaking up the term into four or more short-term classes, Williams students follow four classes all through the term, often twice a week, which has several pedagogic values: you get to know your students (and vice versa!); you can build up a common store of references and theoretical concepts; as a student you will meet the same, or comparable concepts or examples a number of times, and this repetitiveness offers a welcome method of teaching and learning as compared to the short, *read-one-time-only* classes (and exams) so popular among students and perhaps even teachers in Sweden.

In Sweden all teaching is defined by a predefined syllabus (defining targets, literature etc.), called the *Kursplan*; this impractical, bureaucratic and anti-creative system does not exist at Williams. Every teacher, at least in the classes I observed and in my own class, as a matter of course defined everything in his or her own class; instead of writing a course plan perhaps a year before the class, and sticking to this, teachers and the students taught at Williams enjoy the freedom of planning the class directly related to personal research interests, competencies, and last-minute changes are therefore an advantage and not a flaw.

As is well-known, evaluations play a major role in the American system, in particular for tenure-track teachers (teachers with no steady position, a very long “trainee” position). In Williamstown, the evaluation was systematized and anonymized to a very high degree. When I received the result of my evaluation it was almost impossible for me to “read” the complicated statistical material. When I grasped the content I felt satisfied with the result being largely placed at the high end of the “grade scale” I had received as teacher of the class. However, my result was compared in a number of ways to other teachers, both at my own level, in other disciplines etc., and it very clearly turned out that what I considered to be a very good result would count as a rather weak result for a teacher in Williams, and for a tenure-track teacher such a result (if it happened more than once) could have very serious consequences.

There are many aspects of the evaluation system that could be criticized; for instance that the students are very clearly evaluating the teacher and the teacher only (instead of including their own contributions, for instance). Furthermore, “easy” or “fun” classes will probably score better than classes trying to teach other kinds of subjects, or with more demanding methods; and finally, whereas some teachers are

more “entertaining” types, other teachers may be more introvert and therefore less popular. The great advantage of the focus on evaluation, the statistics based on it and the use of it at administrative levels, is that it places a great and welcome emphasis on the teaching and the pedagogics, which I think is part of the very high level of the teaching that I met when I observed other classes at Williams.

PET meetings

An important activity was attending the Program for Effective Teaching (PET) meetings twice a week. The organizers of the meetings, two senior professors, one from the sciences, one from the humanities, describe the activity like this:

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Established in 1995, the Program for Effective Teaching was designed to offer pedagogical insight and support to new faculty in their first through third years at Williams. The heart of the program resides in its weekly lunches, which are informal and relatively unstructured, and where we discuss a vast array of topics around teaching, both in general and as they relate to our particular classrooms. Periodically, we also invite guests who are important campus resources to talk with us about the services they offer or the ways in which their office supports our work with students.

Participation in PET is entirely voluntary: Faculty members may attend as much or as little as they like, and the nature of the program is fundamentally non-evaluative. Its principal goal is to make available a forum for new instructors to discuss pedagogy with more seasoned colleagues and with one another.

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The program is anonymous and the discussions are not minuted and are meant to remain confidential. Therefore, the new teachers, often young and very often about to start on a strenuous tenure-track process, feel free to ask about, comment upon and discuss all matters concerning teaching, including grading, psychological stress, difficult students, the research-teaching ratio, etc. Every now and again, a guest (the leader of the psychological support section, an expert on grades, etc.) was invited to present input on a selected topic for about 15 minutes, which was followed by discussion and questions. This setting proved very productive and supportive for roughly 30 attendants who came to the meetings in Autumn 2012 more or less frequently, and with great *Fingerspitzengefühl* the two supervisors managed to give some solid advice while also

letting the new faculty express their natural insecurity and doubts.

Observation in classes

During the Fall semester I visited about a dozen different teachers and classes to observe the pedagogical tricks and the didactic strategies in use; I decided to sit in on classes more or less in my own field, namely English (including Creative Writing) and Comparative Literature. Basically, what I saw was small classes (mostly 10–20 students); the basis for the teaching in English and Comparative Literature was always the literary text, and the main purpose of the teacher was to create a dialogic process in which many students participate, where the collaborative effort leads to a deeper understanding of the text, and where the students after each class have gained a kind of practical understanding of both the complexity and the richness of the literary text. Such a literary dialogue does not arise all by itself, and all the teachers that I observed were extremely skilled in encouraging, asking, joking and questioning commonsensical understandings of what was going on in the text. Williams students are, furthermore, constantly producing shorter writings on literary texts which either create or refine the writing skills of the students.

I was impressed by the dialogic nature and the liveliness of the classes, but I was a little amazed that historical contexts, theoretical concepts and often even biographical details were almost non-existent in the classes I attended. After each class I had conversations with the professors, and when I remarked on the tendency to pursue teaching very much focused on the autonomic text, most teachers would present a strategy behind this didactic choice: they would say that in basic teaching in the humanities, for instance in literature classes, students have to meet the text as such first, and slowly reach what one professor called “their own critical voice”; only after having acquainted themselves with texts does it make sense to teach theory, both to introduce to important concepts and also to critically understand the concepts. This was a major difference from a Scandinavian or perhaps European pedagogical model in comparative literature and languages, where theoretical concepts or historical contexts are most often in the foreground of the teaching. I think that the teachers of Williams College continue a long and venerable tradition in the US of understanding teaching in the humanities – as a professor from a neighboring college told me at a private party – as an almost religiously inspired dialogue between master and pupil.

And this leads of course to the main reason behind the success of the education offered at Williams: being such an immensely rich college, the student-teacher rate is among the highest in the US, and as such teachers and students can actually, inside and outside of class, engage in this kind of learned and illuminating dialogues.

General lessons

As compared to discussions both in the US and in Scandinavia, Williams College, when it comes to many questions, can afford the luxury of continuing practices that were established quite a bit back in history. In the self-understanding of teachers and leading administrators, Williams has undergone great changes in recent years, mostly concerning what is sometimes called the richer or more heterogeneous (or “mixed”) classroom, meaning the efforts to include more students of different social/ethnic/religious backgrounds than was the case before. All the teachers I have talked to stressed this as something to be proud of, and a look at the student population shows that it is slowly beginning to represent a more accurate image of American society. Funding, both inside and outside Williams College, allows many students to enter, even without paying wholly or partly the fee of more than 50,000 USD a year to obtain the prestigious degree. But apart from the (gradual) change in student population, and also in the faculty, many things remain the same as before. Students live on or very close to campus; they are taught by professors who live very close by, and Williams does not need to open up for teaching via the web, to hold summer schools for outside students, or anything like that. Teaching, at least in the classes I attended, was very traditional when it comes to technology: a blackboard, seldom a PowerPoint presentation, verbal dialogue as the central occupation. “Chalk is back” was even a slogan I heard repeated a few times!

A major difference between Williams College and Scandinavian universities is the fundamental economic model steering the work. In Scandinavia, we are used to trying to maximize by way of more students (because each student’s degree is paid for by the state), whereas Williams College has no intention to grow; through the (terribly high) student fee, a whole army of funding administrators who engage in asking alumni and other possible contributors to help funding, Williams has found a business model that doesn’t even feel like a business model. So instead of the repeated cuts in state funding that more or less force Scandinavian universities to enroll more students (to get

the same funding), Williams College can more or less do as it has been doing for a very long time. Perhaps the most important result of this is that faculty and administration in Williams can concentrate on putting as much effort into each and every student, instead of feeling (economically) forced to “produce” more and more students.

Should students be treated like grown ups or like kids? Williams College has a more or less openly stated strategy of treating students as their responsibility which is a huge difference from Scandinavian universities, where students are very much supposed to take care of themselves. “We don’t fail a Williams Student,” a senior faculty said (only half-ironically) at an introductory meeting, which is probably true. Williams students are treated like “kids” (a term very often used by faculty) in the way that the College tries to ensure a safe community (violence, drugs, for instance) which probably feels very good for the parents sending the students to college (and often paying large sums for it), but from a Scandinavian point of view it feels as if the high school time is prolonged under new settings. When I tried to discuss this with colleagues, both at Williams and from other colleges and universities in the US, almost everybody supported the idea that the mental and physical health of students is to a large extent the responsibility of the college/the teachers. I have thought a lot about this, and perhaps the extreme liberal individualism has gone too far in Scandinavian universities?

Even if the environment is safe, but also a little isolated, a very high number of students use the psychological counseling services available at campus: according to a health officer, 27% of each year’s students frequent these support units, and when finishing Williams College, almost half of the student generation has been in a longer (more than eight meetings) therapeutical process conducted by the health center. Despite all the impressive efforts by the College to produce a life-changing experience (in the positive sense of the word!), it seems as if the isolatedness and protective attitude combined with the competitiveness nevertheless produce a rather tough climate. I was impressed by the way the College tried to address this problem, but it was also very clear to me that the College felt unable, for instance, to ease the students’ huge burden of work: when I humbly tried to suggest that students could perhaps do three instead of four courses, I found no support, neither from teachers nor administrators.

Important lessons

By participating in the PET meetings, by observing classes, and by talking to students, administrators and teachers, my main lesson is that a major reason for the success of Williams College is that it focuses almost entirely on providing first-class *teaching*; all energy, formally and as far as I could tell also informally, is directed towards teaching instead of the European and Swedish model, where many teachers pursue ambitions of being a good teacher and, very often, an excellent researcher. Professors at Williams are chosen because of high-class research and excellent teaching, which is the opposite of the Swedish understanding of the successful professor. It is important to stress that this is not a general American trend: this focus on teaching is exactly what distinguishes (some) Liberal Arts colleges from prestigious research universities, and if as a professor you decide to work in a liberal arts college, even a high-ranking one like Williams College, you must be prepared to put teaching in the first position and focus less on your research and publishing career.

Suggestions to my home institution/Swedish

When it comes to practical suggestions that may be implanted without too great efforts/costs in Sweden and Scandinavia, I would like to mention the following:

New Teacher meetings: as a parallel to the PET meetings described above, it would probably be fruitful to formalize and enlarge the conventional introductions for new staff (which at least at Linnæus University is limited to a one-day course): by focusing in particular on the teaching aspects, a longer sequence of meetings contribute to the general qualitative lift of pedagogy and teaching as compared to research.

Teachers' round table: to let teachers see each other's classes is both inspirational and encouraging. It creates best-practice spirals, and very clearly stresses the importance of teaching, both as technique and as an important task of the university.

Longer courses: Instead of the small, atomized five-week classes, I believe that both teachers and students would benefit greatly from longer classes stretching over a whole term. Repetition and reworking of comparable concepts and texts are brilliant pedagogical tools.

All professors meet the students: In order to work against the Scandinavian systems of research-evaluation and career which produce high-ranking professors that never meet the students, it is an important task to bring all professors, not only "lower-ranking"

faculty (Swedish *lektorer*, *docenter* and also teachers on short-term employment): the students deserve to meet the full professors, too, and when I told American colleagues about the tendency of the Swedish system (the higher you rank, the less you see the students) they found it strange and problematic, and first all they wondered why the students don't protest!

Honor Code; in Williams College there were continual problems with cheating, more or less openly, more or less well organized, more or less consciously (exactly as in Sweden). An important instrument in the work with this is the so-called Honor Code. To sign an Honor Code when you enter a college does not prevent you from committing non-ethical acts, of course, but it does make the subsequent discussion about the instances easier and more clear-cut, because there is a background document to begin with.

Final words

Apart from all the general, personal and at times very specific ideas and observations above, I would like to end with a few comments on the very idea of liberal arts education that Williams College is such a remarkable example of. The task of educating students for a long and fruitful life in society and a life where they contribute to society by way of an education that reaches across disciplinary borders is a beautiful idea. Even if many students of course enter Williams with much more specific and earthbound interests (a Williams degree may very well lead to grad school – and the networking, as a teacher reminded me, being created at Williams is worth all the money!), at Williams I still find a very idealistic and for me hopeful idea of education that we sometimes tend to forget in a Scandinavian context. Here I clearly feel that politicians and even leading faculty and university administrators time and again diminish the value of the idea of *Bildung*, common-educational knowledge, including science, the arts, and society.

A research project has investigated – and later on visualized – the liberal arts education exemplified by Williams, which produces a beautiful image of multiple possibilities and heterogeneity:

<http://www.williams.edu/feature-stories/visualizing-the-liberal-arts/>

In the PR material the visualization was described like this: *Study what you like and then do what you want!* From the viewpoint of staff and administrators at Williams, there is a strong feeling of confidence, that if the basic broad training of the students in writing,

reading, critical thinking, analytical study is in place, then most students will make their way into life, and work, and even return to their old college to support it economically, to see old friends and teachers, to renew their network and pay tribute to the idea of an only seemingly purposeless education. Politicians and leading administrators in Scandinavia try in to link university studies as directly as possible to (what they believe is) the future job market, and they seem to have lost the idea so alive and successful at Williams College that a good education can lead anywhere, and that a good education is a broad education, focusing on both hard and so-called soft science and values: the tradition of *Bildung*, which has been nurtured for centuries in Europe, seems at the present moment to survive only in the US and in new universities in Singapore and Hong Kong. Perhaps *Bildung* will turn out to be not old-fashioned but efficient and an answer to the high-speed and volatile demands of contemporary society: I wonder when we will recognize that here in Scandinavia.

I am extremely grateful to STINT for generously funding travel and stay for me and my family to Williams College; Hans Pohl and in particular Hanna Begler has been a most patient, kind and efficient administrative support for me during a long time. I am at least as grateful to Williams College for receiving me; John Gerry, Lucy Green, Roberta Senecal and last but not least my mentor Christopher Bolton have been generous and extremely helpful during my stay in Williamstown; all the teachers who allowed me into their inspiring classes deserves my gratitude, too. Also, my warm thanks go to Linnæus University, in particular Lena Kulmala and Maria Lindgren, for valuable support in the application process.