

Amherst College, Department of Art and the History of Art 2014

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Overwhelmed with joy for having been selected for STINT's Teaching Sabbatical grant to Amherst College I immediately wrote to my contact persons at the college: Professor Justin Kimball, Chair at the Department of Art and the History of Art, and Janet Tobin at the Dean's office. It was Christmas Day, but nonetheless I received an immediate and welcoming response from Janet Tobin, which (as I later came to understand) is all in line with her amazing engagement. She has been involved in the STINT program at Amherst since the start and probably knows it better than anyone else at the college. She was of incredible help to us, in both practical, professional, and personal issues.

My stay in Amherst would involve many different implications for the whole family and we were very anxious that our children (8 and 11 years old) should feel as comfortable as possible with the transition to another country and language. We saw the time in MA as an investment and adventure for everyone in the family and this guided us in everything – from the way I organized my work, to making sure that we had enough time and resources for plenty of trips in New England. We were all extremely keen to see and learn as much as we possibly could during these few months.

Preparation and planning

We started planning the spring visit soon after the Christmas holidays. However, it turned out to be surprisingly difficult to find a good time for it. Although I had an unusually flexible schedule and suggested many different dates, the response from my hosting department was rather slow (which, as I understood later, was not representative to Amherst). The department was to undergo an external review, my contact professor Kimball was planning an exhibition, and we did not seem to get anywhere for weeks until I was redirected to professor Nicola Courtright, who then remained my main contact person at the department throughout my stay there. We ended up going to Amherst around Easter and spent 5 days there with a very intense schedule that Janet Tobin had put together in collaboration with the Art Department.

Although the time for our visit was finally decided in mid-January, it was not until late February that we came to a decision regarding my teaching for the fall semester. My impression was that the department was happy to have me, but also a little unprepared for what that would demand of them in return. When we finally had the discussion about my class, we had passed the mid-February deadline for the fall semester course catalogue and I needed to produce a course description in literally no-time.

My speciality is curating and contemporary art, two fields of study in which the Art Department at Amherst lack faculty. They can only provide courses in contemporary art if they get visiting faculty to

teach them. However, already in my STINT application I had been very clear with my wish to co-teach a course, as I wanted to avoid spending one semester abroad and only repeat what I had already done at Stockholm University. I was keen to learn as much as I possibly could and did not find repetition (albeit in a new setting) a very productive strategy for that purpose. Stressing my wish to co-teach turned out to be a good strategy: although the department initially suggested that I would do a course on my own, I could easily argue for co-teaching with reference to my application. Nicola Courtright then landed a collaboration with the Mead Art Museum, i.e. the museum that houses the Amherst College art collection (which is outstanding): we decided that I would teach a new course called Contemporary Art and Curatorial Practice together with the museum's director Dr Elizabeth Barker, who since her arrival in Amherst seven years ago had transformed the museum and worked towards a greater integration of the collection in education and courses. Lizzie Barker and I had one skype-conversation regarding the layout of the course (something that I had previously also discussed with Courtright) and although I took on the job of producing the course description and syllabus, it was very productive and fun to know that we created a course that would be embedded in the rich resources at Amherst. Nicola Courtright sent me a couple of syllabi from other courses at the department, which was of great help.

During our spring visit, I made sure to make my own investigations of the college's resources (discussing with faculty and staff; visiting the museums; checking out the library's collection of artist books; attending seminars in other courses at the department, one of which took place at the Mead Art Museum). The plan behind this was to be able to build a course that a) was in line with the teaching strategies at Amherst; b) made use of the local resources; c) would be fun to teach; and d) would enable me to learn a lot. One very important factor (as it turned out) was a dinner at Nicola Courtright's house to which she had invited curators and faculty from the other museums and art departments in the Five College Consortium.¹ Her aim was to make my presence known to everyone, and it proved to be a very well invested couple of hours: when returning to Amherst in the fall I had a good idea of who worked where, and could easily reconnect with the curators and scholars we had met in the spring. Several also contacted me, interested in hearing more about my course and (not least) the curatorial program I worked with at Stockholm University.

By the beginning of the summer the course description was already in place, but the more detailed content of the course (including the literature, readings, schedules, and field trips) was still open. After our spring visit, communication returned to minimal again (also with my co-teacher). I had very vague ideas about deadlines for literature and syllabus and similar, but carried on with my own planning as far

¹ The other colleges in the area are Mount Holyoke, Smith, Hampshire, and UMASS. All but Hampshire have very fine art collections and museums. Hampshire was however in the process of developing a five-college project in digital curating for the summer 14, as a way of navigating the lack of their own collection. The colleges are overall collaborating a lot in courses and projects. Students can take courses at any of the five colleges. As a result, the different departments try to collaborate as far as possible so that courses that might attract the same students don't collide.

as possible. In July I received an email from the Library, asking for the literature list: It turned out that they scan every article, secure the rights to reproduce them, and upload them on the course's website, which was a small miracle compared to the lack of a similar administrative support at my home department. Not having to count pages and cut articles that are more than 17 pages was a great relief, not to mention getting professional support with the scanning.

Tasks and responsibilities

The basic structure for the course was set in the course description:

- The course would be limited to 15 students (although I ended up with 9, which was a much more appropriate number in regards to the activities we planned for the course).
- Classes twice a week, Tue and Thu 2.30-3.50 (no break).
- There would be a combination of text seminars, and text- and image seminars. The text- and image seminars took place in the Mead's study room, where we could bring up artworks from storage for closer study. (For these sessions I had a tremendous and extremely inspiring collaboration with Amy Halliday at the Mead, who shared my passion for the art-seminar format and also brought new and unexpected angles to each theme. She was indeed my co-teacher in this course, and pivotal for it developing so well.)
- The students were to hand in one written assignment every week for the first part of the semester, all-in-all 10 hand-ins (Nicola Courtright's suggestion – "otherwise they won't read the literature"). The hand-ins constituted 50% of the grade.
- The remaining 50% was assigned a final curatorial project (i.e. an exhibition proposal) that the students would develop individually, with material mainly from the Mead or the Frost Library's special collections of artist books. The final project had 3 components: a written curatorial statement for the Mead's website; an oral presentation of the project; a visualization of the planned exhibition. They were also to hand in a written paper about their project showing how the education and readings had informed their choices. Staff from the Mead attended the oral presentations in December and provided in-house feedback.
- We planned for 1-2 field trips and 1 artist talk (and ended up with only 1 field trip, to Boston).
- In the syllabus I also stated my office hours, Wed 2-4.
- My course started Sep 2 and ended with the written paper hand-in on Dec 14. Last day of class was Dec 9, a date that was regulated by the college.
- The college also had a one week long thanksgiving recess. (Everything slowed down quite a bit after that as many courses went into the period of final examinations.)

When we moved to Amherst in early August, basically no one at the department had returned from their vacation. There were still many decisions to be made, a lot of things to figure out (funding for field trip; funding for visiting lecturer; administration for the course website; getting a room for the seminars;

getting a printer; etc). On top of that, in the last days of July (i.e. just before we moved to Amherst) my co-teacher Lizzie Barker informed me that she had been appointed head curator of Boston Athenaeum, leaving the Mead already in early September. Her new position meant that I with short notice needed to engage other staff members at the Mead to take over some of her seminars, which fortunately turned out less difficult than I had feared.

Although the first weeks of August were stressful in many ways (so I was very grateful for us getting there well in advance before the course would start), the support and help from Janet Tobin, the interim director at the Mead Pamela Russell, Mead's curator for education Amy Halliday, and department coordinator Louise Beckett magically made everything work out eventually. The department seemed very casual about my coming there so I had to do a lot of investigations on my own regarding dates for holidays, the length of the semester, grades, what would be a reasonable amount of readings for the students, figuring out the course website Moodle, etc. On the other hand, I realized how experienced I have become in course administration since I actually managed to solve a lot of it pretty much on my own, and without having a nervous breakdown despite the change of co-teaching plans. I ended up with a 10 pp long syllabus (which is about normal length) that included the schedule and also described and specified everything in the course. In the syllabus, I made a short description of each 2-3 week section, or theme, in the course, which was very helpful for my own thinking and organisation of the semester. I could make a rough plan for every lecture, even the ones that would come pretty late in the semester. It was a great relief not to have to fall into the last minute, half-unprepared stress-lecturing that the work load at home forces many of us to manage. Since I was dependent on the staff at the Mead for bringing up artworks from storage for our seminars, I also needed to know well in advance what each seminar would involve.

Activities during the semester

Very soon after our arrival the whole family was invited to "Dean's BBQ with Dinosaurs and Friends" – a very fun lunch with a good turn-up, including the President Biddy Martin and the Dean of Faculty Catherine Epstein (who was new to this position), and several staff members from the administration. It also included a brilliant presentation of the Beneski Museum of Natural History on campus (hence the "dinosaurs"). So already at a very early stage I was presented to some of the key persons at Amherst and started to know a little of how things worked. The relaxed atmosphere and the activities for the kids made a really good start for all of us. It took place in the middle of August, thus a couple of weeks before the start of the semester.

The new semester was celebrated by the first Faculty Meeting and (afterwards) Convocation – the festive meeting (robes on!) for faculty and students in the Johnson Chapel, on Sep 1 (classes started on Sep 2). I found the whole context, and this unanimous celebration of education, history, and collectiveness both moving and inspiring. Being included here strengthened the sense of togetherness – of being a real part of the college community – a feeling that actually remained throughout the semester

(although when getting better insight in things later on, I was also made aware of some of its complexities).

It was interesting to observe how the college works as one big organism totally dedicated to education. Education, pedagogy, and learning run in every fibre of this body in a much more concrete sense than I am used to. It is present in the administration; in all the various resource centres (library, museums, IT, archives and the staff there); in the conversation with colleagues. Not everyone talked about their research (or lack of time for it) but literally every person I met, irrespective of position, discussed their classes, teaching, and students. Since I had made sure to involve other scholars, institutions, and staff in my course, I had plenty of opportunities to observe how this attitude worked in practice, and it was indeed fascinating to see the creativity and impressive level of pedagogic thinking that was present everywhere. This is indeed a college where it is fair to claim that pedagogic experience has the same status as research. In order to investigate how this was implemented at the college, a very good thing was to attend the library's presentation of their resources, and the Mead's workshop relating to "teaching with art", which targeted faculty in all departments. Both presentations highlighted how staff at the museum and library (including the special collections and archive) had worked closely together with faculty in courses and assignments. They presented different examples of courses in which faculty members had collaborated with museums, library, and archives in the development of assignments and other course elements. In my course, I concentrated on the collaboration with the Mead, but I connected very well with a staff member in the archives, artist and archivist Sara Smith, who ended up holding a seminar on artist books and also helped organize a public presentation by my visiting artist/lecturer Jonathon Keats at the library.

The college arranged a number of luncheons for new and visiting faculty over the semester. They had different themes such as "How to make the most of your time at Amherst" or "Teaching at Amherst: Observations on local culture and expectations". I found them very rewarding, not only through their content, but also because they made you connect with visiting or new faculty from other departments. It gave me a good sense of how Amherst was similar to – or different from – other colleges and universities in the US. Since there were quite a few of these arrangements, I made some very good friends and we continued to meet also outside these arranged luncheons.

I was also invited to the semester's two Faculty Meetings, led by the President Martin and the Dean of Faculty. The occasions for meeting with my fellow colleagues at the Art Department were however few indeed, but we had one staff meeting and a Master's potluck picnic at Nicola Courtright's house (better turn-up of staff than students actually). The department is situated in the vast, beautiful Fayerweather building that contains both offices, seminar rooms, artist studios, and an exhibition space. But the structure of it is strange and the lack of meeting facilities (no pantry, few offices on every floor, and therefore literally impossible to know who is there) is rather discouraging. You could spend days there without meeting a single colleague so I soon decided to move my office work to the library, including my

office hours. Apparently quite a few did the same thing – the library turned out to be a popular meeting place for both faculty and students, and thanks to the move I actually met my students more often than I would have otherwise.

Office hours are important at Amherst, and a link to the close relationship between students and instructors that is encouraged. Being new to Amherst and not having taught this course before, I was keen to get a sense of what the students thought of it and what their individual interests were. The move to the library was a good strategy to make them come, but nonetheless they needed quite a lot of encouragement. I made it very clear that I wanted to meet with each one of them, and when we got closer to their final projects I also arranged meetings outside office hours since many of them had classes that collided with my scheduled O.H.

One of my major interests and what I tried to pay extra attention to during the semester in Amherst, was how art is used in education. In my collaboration with the Mead, this was of course very present and we could test different pedagogical tools during the semester. I also arranged a field trip to Boston, arranging curator meetings at Boston Athenaeum (with Lizzie Barker) and Boston ICA (the Institute of Contemporary Art), and invited artist Jonathon Keats (an Amherst alum now living in San Francisco) for an artist talk and seminar. These two activities made me realise that the departments do not have much money to spend on these things, but that all extra costs must be applied for from the college administration. Janet Tobin directed me to the right persons and suggested different funds, but there was nonetheless some unexpected administration around these activities. Furthermore, since the students take 4 courses per semester, it was extremely difficult to make any kind of arrangements outside the hours of my class, since that meant that the students would miss other classes.

To investigate art in education even further, I made sure to visit the other college museums at Mt Holyoke, Smith College, and UMASS, all of which have amazing collections that they work with in different ways in classes and education. As a family we also toured a lot and visited a number of museums in Massachusetts, travels that in fact had a large impact on my views and understanding of this field.

Important lessons

The semester at Amherst College made me reflect on many things: my teaching, pedagogical tools, the student-teacher relationship, just to mention a fraction of the areas that I have been interested in. I will not be able to discuss them all here, but concentrate on the ones that were most clearly activated in the course I taught.

Coming to Amherst for only one semester meant that many things in my course resembled courses and pedagogical strategies that I had developed at Stockholm University. Although I co-taught the course with the Mead, I was the one writing the course description and syllabus, organising the structure and assignments, deciding on the readings, and all of this basically before coming to Amherst. Hence, for the

ground structure I worked pretty much with the same set of tools as at SU. Once at Amherst however, and when talking to colleagues, I got several ideas on different approaches that would have been interesting to try. It would have been very valuable to do the same course a second time, in order to really get into the creative and innovative methods that make it possible for Amherst College to pride itself in providing top-quality education, and thus enable a real possibility of transforming my own teaching.

The major difference from my work at Stockholm University was of course having access to such rich resources, and having more time for preparation. Several administrative burdens are lifted from the faculty, i.e. scanning of texts, setting up the course website, and photo-copying material for the students. Only teaching one course would equal working half time (Amherst College faculty normally teaches two courses per semester). With less administrative work and only one course to teach, it was actually possible to do proper preparations, provide extensive feedback, and have some time for reflection. As mentioned, we had only one staff meeting, and when it occurred it was scheduled late in the afternoon (4.30) and very efficient (1 hour). Faculty meetings started at 7.30 PM and lasted 2 hours, so that they would not collide with anyone's teaching. From this I realized how much of my normal workdays at Stockholm University that goes into administration and meetings, so much so that it affects my teaching and student relations.

Even if I have done a lot of teaching in English before in my role as director for an international master's program, I suffered a little from the awareness that I could not be as efficient and exact as I wanted to in lectures and seminars. I realized how important the language is to me, and how much effort I put in being very exact and concise. Luckily the students did not seem to mind. Also, I felt support in reading earlier STINT reports, one of which discussed how the language barrier can be used as a creative tool in the education – a starting point for discussions on what terms and concept actually mean.

In one of the faculty meetings, there was a discussion on course evaluations that I found very enlightening. Course evaluations play a central role in tenure decisions; in other words they are both compulsory and official documents for junior faculty. However, for senior faculty they had been more "optional" (which this faculty meeting actually ended up changing, deciding that all courses should be evaluated). What surprised me though, was the fact that course evaluations for courses taught by senior faculty were only aimed for the eyes of the teaching professor. They were seen as a tool for the professor to develop her/his teaching. When I were to set together the evaluation for my course, Nicola Courtright provided me with samples from her courses and I also got the college's general on-line evaluation. They showed that a lot of attention was given to reflections on the students' learning process (i.e. "Were there ways in which your intellectual experience in this course influenced your thinking beyond the course?"). Other questions dealt with the student-professor relationship ("List briefly the criteria you consider most important in judging the effectiveness of a teacher. What qualities are most helpful to your learning?" or "Did the instructor encourage wide participation of the class in discussions

and critiques?”). I felt that the approach made a lot of sense. I will definitely incorporate some of the formulations in my course evaluations at SU: encouraging the students to reflect on their learning process and think about what kind of characteristics they as individuals feel are important in a professor, seem to me as an efficient way to highlight that there are many different views on what constitutes good pedagogy. It is also made clear to the students who will read the evaluation and that the teacher will not look at them until the grades are set. I felt that the formulations and organisation showed a trust in the faculty’s wish to do a good job and develop their teaching skills. The collective course evaluation analyses at my home department (thoroughly discussed at department meetings and published on the intranet, but surprisingly seldom leading to any real change if they should hint in that direction) often develop in a rather destructive and depressing direction.

Comparisons between the foreign and the home institution

At Amherst College all faculty seems to work from the same preconditions: everyone teaches 4 classes per year, everyone gets a sabbatical every 6th semester. No-one wants to be Chair, so this position rotates at the department, changing every 2-3 years. The departments have very little money, and so everyone has to apply from the college for funding for field trips, guest lectures, and material investments. All faculty is invited to the faculty meetings, and decisions are made through voting. Difference in status and power is perhaps most apparent at the Convocation, when your placement in the Johnson Chapel is based on how long you have been employed at the college (and so the fronts rows are mainly occupied by elderly, white, male professors). All faculty is also referred to as professors, consequently a title that says what you do (teach and research) rather than what you have done before. Everyone, however senior and experienced, is expected to participate in the frequent seminars and workshops for faculty that discuss pedagogic issues and -development.

I found this structure very appealing since it provides everyone with the same obligations and possibilities. In the Swedish system, your title is key: although you share the responsibilities as teachers, your title (*lektor, docent, professor*) provides you with different time for research (at my department stretching between 25 and 75%), and decides if you can have representation in boards (i.e. power and a say-so in matters regarding the university’s organization, faculty matters, stipends and grants, etc). In effect, the ones who are in the greatest need of doing research since that is the only way to get more power in the organization, are at the same time those with the least time allotted for that research. It is in my view a far less democratic system that furthermore supports status quo in gender and other representation. Although I realise that there are representational and diversity issues at a college like Amherst too, not least when it comes to race and class, I find this structural “likeness” between colleagues a far better starting point to achieve real change. Furthermore, there seemed to be a willingness to discuss issues on representation, stereotypification, and racism, and an honest wish to act for change. First-year students started their studies at Amherst with reading a book on this topic, and it was then discussed in small groups together with senior faculty. Although there were some discussion

among the faculty on the quality of the selected reading, no one seemed to question the relevance of the topic in the context of the college's responsibilities. At my home university, this kind of awareness and action plan for change is something that appears to be dependent on individual initiatives, some departments being stronger in the area than others.

The Department of Art and the History of Art did not have any faculty that specialized in contemporary art, and were dependent on visiting faculty for classes that dealt with this topic. Visiting faculty mainly came from the Five College Consortium, or other universities in the US. Every application for new faculty had to be granted by the college. As consequence, all departments competed in the funding for these positions. The Mead Art Museum too had very few permanent positions, in fact, the overall impression was that the number of permanent faculty and staff was kept to a minimum. At the Mead, most temporary positions were dependent on some form of external funding, often in the shape of donations and grants. Although the staff made an extremely professional work and was crucial for developing the much wanted collaborations with the faculty, there seemed to be little chance of getting extra funding from the college to employ more staff. Thus, the departments and institutions are not in charge of their own budgets in the same way as they are in Sweden, but subordinate to the overall budget-related strategies of the college in a very concrete way. My home department at SU obviously needs to get the university's approval when it wants to employ new faculty and staff, but I had a distinct impression that it was more difficult at Amherst.

The classes at Amherst College (at least the ones I had the opportunity to get some insight in) were very analogue, the only presence of digital tools being the course platform Moodle, some digitalised readings, and assignments that could include developing web-related or digital tools. Similarly to the course platform I work from at Stockholm University, Moodle contained schedule and syllabus, instructions, contacts, and similar. However, many professors asked for hand-ins in hard copies, and the majority still handed out printed course evaluations instead of using a digital version.

The absence of digital tools is (I think) in part an effect of the view on pedagogy that is nourished at the college, supporting and expecting a close relationship between faculty and students. Each student has an advisor that is supposed to guide them through their years at Amherst, helping them to select courses etc. The advisor changes every year. The student-faculty ratio is 8 to 1. Faculty is expected to have an eye on every student in their class, noticing if something is wrong, and building a trusting relationship that hopefully will continue also after the student's graduation. In fact, the students have an expectation that their professors will act as role models. Pedagogy stretches far beyond the education in class: to a substantial part it involves the learning for life as well. Stressing the individual relationships and the mutual exchange between students and their professors, it becomes obvious that Amherst will not go down the path of distance course-development in any near future. In order to support the relation-building between faculty and students off-class, the college has some funds explicitly aimed for that purpose. Students can apply from the "Take your Professor out to Dinner"-fund (might not be the

correct title, but it is in essence what the fund is for) and faculty can get a specific sum for taking students to a restaurant or inviting them to their homes.²

Amherst College admit 14% of the applying students, irrespective of their ability to pay for the education (i.e. need-blind). The students are very well aware of how difficult it is to be admitted and they are often reminded that Amherst students are some of the best in the country. The students in my class came from Amherst, Smith, and Hampshire College. They performed on a very high level and always came well prepared to the seminars. Despite the demanding hand-ins, no one was late without good reason, and if they needed an extension they always asked in advance. I could count on them attending every class. They were not absent without good reason and always let me know beforehand if they would be missing a class. It was however quite apparent that many students felt stressed due to the pressure of their studies: 20% visit the College Counseling Center at some point during their years at the college – a very high number. This was discussed in different ways, not least among the faculty. Living on campus, having an intense schedule, and being constantly reminded about how good you must be having been admitted to Amherst, can certainly be a tough cluster of factors when your studies do not go so well, or when you feel insecure for some reason. Even if faculty was encouraged to discuss that performance is not everything, and that it is quite ok to fail, many students were terrified of failing. Grades below B could be seen as a disaster (the college average was A-). My students at Stockholm University are generally less obsessed with grades (although my international students are not) and have a pretty cool and relaxed view on their studies (for good and bad). Many are also older than the students at Amherst, my class having ages ranging between 19 and 22, which I suspect was around average.

Action plan – topics to address and if possible introduce in Sweden

My wish when going to Amherst was to investigate how college and university collections of art are activated in education. What pedagogical tools are used? What kinds of resources are needed? How is a museum's collection introduced to students and faculty, who do not normally work with this kind of material in class? I knew that Amherst College had a reputation of working actively with their art collection, but it was indeed a surprise to find that this was a well-established strategy also in the other colleges in the area, and in the region at large. Although the art collections are important as markers of history, status, and wealth to a college or university, this by no means reduce their impact as learning tools and research material. Swedish universities and university colleges have to my knowledge either chosen to primarily see their collections as part of their inventory, or placed them in separate museums that lack an obvious connection to higher education or established collaborations with faculty. I want to investigate the possibilities of working in a different way with the Stockholm University art collection, more in line with what I saw in the US. This would indeed be a fun and challenging task, and the

² When my visiting artist came, I invited him, some colleagues, and all my students over for dinner, however without applying for money from the funds since it was a late decision. It was very nice and definitely something I will consider doing again.

semester at Amherst College has been truly inspirational. An even greater challenge would be to allocate the time and resources to work for this change.

When designing my course at Amherst, I was keen to build in collaborations that could last also after my return to Sweden. Integrating networking in the course structure meant that I could get to know colleagues really well. This helped me a lot during the semester, and I am convinced that they will remain valuable as friends and professional network also in the future. Amherst College, the Five College Consortium, and the region in Massachusetts, provided me with a context that helped me clarify how I want to develop my work in the future, and also the contacts that would make that transformation possible.