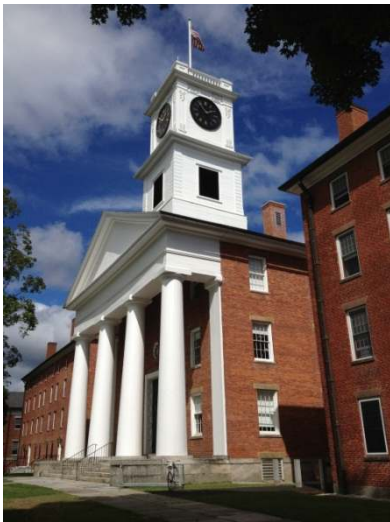


STINT Report: Amherst College 2012

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Amherst College is a private liberal arts college in Western Massachusetts. The college was founded in 1821 as a theological seminary and was all male until 1975. Now it is secular and co-ed with a diverse student body of ca 1800. 60% receive financial (scholarship) aid, 35% are “students of color” and there are international students from 40 countries. Its teaching faculty counts more than 200. It is ranked as one of the best liberal arts colleges in the US, and is known for its open curriculum with courses in 36 fields of study. The beautiful campus lies in the town of Amherst in the Pioneer Valley.

The First Steps: Planning and Preparation

In February 2012 I was told that I had been offered a STINT fellowship for the coming fall semester to visit and teach at Amherst College. Within 24 hours after the exciting news, I had entered an extensive e-mail correspondence with two effective Americans; *Janet Tobin*, Assistant Dean of Faculty at Amherst College, and Professor *Maria Heim* the (then) chair of the Religion department, who would be hosting me. Janet and Maria were both, from day one, extremely forthcoming, welcoming and helpful. We were soon discussing dates for a planning visit in the spring, possibilities for the course I was to give, as well as raising practical issues such as housing and options for school and part time day care for our children (aged 6 and 3).

Quite soon after I got the news, the course catalogue at Amherst was to be finalized and I to present a description for my course. This needed to go fast, and was somewhat stressful. Having little background in the American education system or the Amherst curriculum, I found it difficult (but interesting) to suggest possible courses. It was instructive to look at other catalogue descriptions, but with hindsight I should have asked more questions about what my options for course construction were, such as describing the course as “writing intensive” or “discussion intensive” , or “capping” the course at a certain number of participants. I ended up with three proposals based on my fields of

interest and competence. These were discussed by the department, and they chose the course “Science Fiction, Narrative and Identity”. I was told it would probably be popular, and that I could expect 15-20 students to sign up for it.

My husband and I visited Amherst in April and were provided with a well-planned schedule which included interesting and informative conversations with key people at the college. Both Janet and Maria kindly took the time to show us around the town and its vicinity, to visit preschools and schools as well as looking at housing options.

We planned our departure to the USA (Boston) for the middle of August, roughly 3 weeks before the start of the semester. For several reasons this was delayed until the end of August, which gave us little time to settle before the beginning of college classes and school. I would recommend an arrival mid-month. There is a lot to organize for some months abroad, so I suggest that future fellows start early and to remember that much is closed in Sweden over the summer. Although there seems to be time, everything takes more time when offices are closed and key people are on vacation. Managing all the papers needed for visa applications, and organizing vaccination and health documentation for the children were particularly time consuming tasks.

The question of housing in Amherst proved to be surprisingly difficult. This has, according to Janet, never been a problem for former STINT fellows, and she was surprised at this. It was not until July that a suitable apartment was found. This also meant that we did not, until quite late, know which school our daughter would be attending. However, the accommodation we had turned out to be excellent, in Amherst Center with walking distance to work and day care and with a school bus stop just outside the door. As we lived centrally, we benefitted from the use of Zipcars, a car pool with a location on campus. This worked very well, but it took some time to set up an account. In addition to using Zipcars, we would rent a car every second weekend or so for outings in the beautiful surroundings of Amherst. Had we not lived so centrally, a more permanent car solution would have been necessary.

I went in to college for my first day on a very hot Tuesday morning, on August 28th. Classes were due to start on Wednesday 5th but the new students (Freshmen) were already being welcomed with a plethora of activities. I was placed in an office next to the department secretary, Diane Dix, which turned out to be a perfect place to work as Diane could provide lots of practical help and information, in addition to being pleasant company. There was also a coffee-machine in her office, which meant that the religion faculty would come by regularly and this gave me ample opportunity to meet my colleagues – which was a welcome asset in a work culture that differs from the Swedish work culture in that in Sweden we have set times for coffee breaks during the day. These coffee breaks are an

important source of company, caffeine and information. After a few small and understandable glitches, I was provided with a computer and printer, log-in information and other practical necessities for a good working environment. And so I was set to embark on a great adventure.

My Course and I: Contexts, Comparisons and Challenges

Most of my time as a professor at Amherst College was spent teaching my course, Religion 126: *“Science Fiction, Narrative and Identity”*. I will structure the major part of my report around a description of my course and its context. In this loosely structured description I shall integrate many of my reflections on Amherst College, my pedagogic experiences and include some comparisons to a Swedish context.

Reli 126 was a course in which I could use my competence in the fields of literature and ethics, narrative ethics, hermeneutics and world-view studies. Together with the students, I had the opportunity to study Science Fiction in some depth (which for me has been a new literary genre academically speaking, although not personally). It was immensely rewarding work in many ways. In part I found it very beneficial with respect to my research. Most important, however, was the pedagogic experience and perspective I gained from teaching the class as well as the pleasure of getting to know and interact with my students. It also, more than anything else at Amherst, highlighted my experiences as a teacher in Sweden for better and for worse (as will become clear from this report).

The class met for 80 minutes twice a week for 13 weeks. We were almost always in the same classroom; a rather shabby but comfortable room with basic electronic equipment installed. New this semester was the possibility of using iPads in the classroom, with wireless streaming through a projector. I am normally interested in technical possibilities for pedagogics, but kept a very low-tech profile at Amherst apart from the use of the learning platform Moodle. This was also relatively new at Amherst, but a platform with which I am very familiar from Uppsala. I found that I could help colleagues think about how to integrate the platform in the class work.

The first weeks of the semester, during what is called the “add/drop-period”, many students came and went but after a while the class settled at 35 students, which is a large class – particularly by Amherst standards where the student-to-faculty ratio is 8:1 and the average class size is 16 students. I had planned for fewer students, and worried about managing good discussions where every student could find their voice. I (partially) solved it by organizing many of the discussions as small group discussions (2-3 or 5-6 students) with particular tasks to bring back into a large group discussion. These groups were never the same. Mostly they were organized randomly, but other times they were organized according to specific academic interests, year or chosen themes to pursue in relation to a text.

The small group discussions turned out to become the backbone of the course, and were very popular. We would start in the full group and continue in smaller groups before pulling together some threads at the end of class. At the beginning of the semester I had planned that one of the weekly classes would be a thematic lecture tuning in to our text books, and the other a discussion based close reading of the given literary texts and films. I soon dropped the full time lectures, but would hold mini-lectures and prepare the discussions well so as to make sure they were varied and thoughtful as well as providing theoretical as well as practical substance to the learning goals of the course.

In addition to the classroom discussions each student wrote a weekly log, in which they were expected to write about the past week's learning experience. Most students would balance a continuation of class discussions with a "meta-reflection" over their own process of learning and insight. Further, they were expected to read at least some of their class-mates logs, which they did – and often tied in to the web discussions during subsequent classroom discussions. In this way, many of the quieter students' voices became included in the communal development of ideas. It didn't matter so much that some were quieter than others, or that some students preferred longer trains of thought than what the classroom setting permitted. I think there is much to gain by extending the use of such cross-over methods in my classes at home, in particular with respect to the practice of writing which is in dire need of development in Swedish universities.

To drop lecturing was scary, as I initially worried that I would lose control over the learning process of the students. It was difficult to let go of it, and thus I realized how much of a backbone lecturing is to me. I believe this is true of many Swedish university courses (at least in the humanities). What I realized, was that together, and by trusting them, the students and I were filling the gap with more voices and a wider range of topics were discussed in further depth than I would have managed on my own. This was an eye-opener in relation to how I see my role as a teacher. I could see how much I had internalized an idea of the teacher as a communicator of a given content to her students. In many (not all) classrooms in our Nordic context, there is less focus on active learning, i.e. the actual *practice* of critical thinking and the act of internalizing difficult material in a way that is fruitful for being able to handle unknown futures. Also, teaching a course in which I was methodologically and theoretically confident and sound, but less than an expert on the material we were studying, I learned that the best teaching I have done happened as I walked *with* the students. I didn't always know the goal, but I knew how to walk and navigate and how to read the new landscape. This I could teach them. I am obviously familiar with the phrase "learning by doing", but never quite understood its impact on teaching until my Amherst experience. From the students' evaluation, the main impression was that they enjoyed the class very much, and learned a great deal in this context of being free to think for themselves; they learned about our texts and of theories of reading, they encountered

existential questions, and were challenged to develop their thoughts about world views, ethical dilemmas and philosophical issues.

The students were a relatively diverse group when considering academic interests. I found that many were planning to major in the sciences, and this was a welcome change from the students I meet in Sweden who for the most part are hard-core humanists. Age-wise, they were a more homogenous class than I normally encounter in Sweden, ranging from 18-23 years of age. I was cordially referred to as “Professor Eriksen”, and the students were polite and hard working. I could usually expect readings and assignments to be done, more or less on time. They were bright, ambitious and open-minded, most of them interested in learning for their own sakes. Their writing skills were on an average significantly higher than in Sweden. They wouldn’t normally complain about their grades, but were very interested in how they could improve their skills for future work.

However, they were also over-worked and would seldom have the energy go “that extra mile” because it was fun, or interesting. In addition to my course, they all studied three other courses during the semester. Academic life took up all their time, and they lived a sheltered life with few responsibilities outside of course work and some extra-curricular activities. At Amherst, the students were often referred to as “kids” – by faculty and by the students themselves. Students in Sweden need to integrate their student identity with living “in the real world”, as adults. Most students have to balance responsibilities for living independently, studying, working and often family life. The Swedish students will often be somewhat more mature than the American students, although this can not be stated at an individual level.

Amherst has a so-called “open curriculum”, which is rather unusual in the American context. The students have great freedom regarding choice of courses. There are certain requirements for a Major, but these are not usually stressed until the third (Junior) year. Each student has an advisor who helps them form a balanced and wide platform of learning. The ideal of Liberal Arts colleges in general and Amherst College in particular is to develop “well-rounded” citizens. This has very high priority, as does the rigour of the academic work (although this is possibly somewhat less theoretical than in Sweden). There is little talk about “the labor market”, or “employability”, which in Sweden there is an increasing demand to adhere to. This is partly because the professional training for the most part will take place after college, in graduate school, and partly because the education the students receive is considered an elite education and is a quality marker in itself. Only about 1/10 of potential students who apply are offered a place at Amherst College. A degree from a college such as Amherst means that the student is academically well trained, with a wide range of knowledge and skills from a variety of fields.

Thus, a broad and diverse portfolio of courses is an ideal, and students with a particular interest in natural sciences would be recommended to take courses in the humanities and vice versa. I could seldom find a point of departure in common knowledge, which was an interesting challenge – but surprisingly unproblematic. The different points of view from physics, psychology, computer science, religion, anthropology and literature etc stimulated discussions and deepened insight. The open curriculum also means that there will often be various degrees of college experience in the a classroom. A few courses are oriented specifically to first-year students (Freshmen seminars), and others more focused for “upper classers”. I had students from all four years, which I enjoyed – but also found challenging as the Freshmen had a harder time coping with new academic standards of speaking and writing. However, this variation in experience was for the most part an advantage, and the older students would often (not always) be generous in helping the younger in developing their skills.

The large group of 35 students meant that the work load of grading papers and other assignments was substantial. The students wrote their weekly log (which I always read and often referred to, but I did not write individual comments to all), they wrote two papers (4-6 pages), a film review, and held a spoken presentation. This was a lot for all, and I adjusted the syllabus so that they could skip the film review if they liked, and let the log count for more credits.

Instruction and constructive feed back are a backbone in the development of good communication skills as well as of development of critical thinking. Sometimes, however, there just isn't time for sufficient feed back. It is important to consider whether or not this should mean that there should be less writing. I found the work load substantial, and decided to give fuller comments to the first paper than to the final paper, as the first was more of a learning-paper than the second. Further, the students peer-reviewed first drafts of their papers. This was successful. For my future work, I would like to continue studying alternative models for feed back so that a teacher's work load does not become an argument for less practice in writing.

The Amherst faculty are not (normally) compensated for the the extra student contact and grading work a large group involves. However, over the course of several semesters at Amherst, the department and teacher's choice of courses would to some extent take expected student numbers into consideration, thus compensating each teacher over time for a heavy work load in a particular course. This differs from our routines at the theological department of Uppsala university where we are assigned somewhat more hours for a larger class (extra seminar groups and time for examination).

Further, although the work load for faculty at Amherst often was significant, my impression was that their research, teaching and administrative tasks were more focused. They had fewer, but longer and

somewhat more intensive courses where they could get the satisfaction of actually seeing change and development in the students over time. The courses they gave often tied in (to a greater or lesser extent) to the research they at the time were conducting. The faculty were expected to partake in committee work as well as department and faculty meetings, but rather a lot of work in one committee than little work in many. They were also expected to work with their research, and generally had a high level of publication. The synergy effect of research, teaching and administration seemed to me to be effective and meaningful. The Amherst faculty were busy, but their efforts and attention were not spread as thinly over so much as I find is the case for most faculty in my home institution.

It was thought provoking that I more often in Amherst than in Uppsala heard faculty express joy over their job. Frustrations, yes, but the explicit bottom line was that they loved their jobs – and they said it. I think many Uppsala faculty love their jobs too, but possibly more in an ideal than real sense. This might also have to do with cultural aspects; what we say publicly and not. However, I think the problem runs deeper than cultural stereotype. My strong impression was that the Amherst faculty felt that they own their own time, although they may feel that there is too little time. In Uppsala, many feel that they have little control over their time and effort, and that much energy and joy is wasted. (Let me stress, however, that this is a subjective impression).

I had office hours twice a week, and around the time for the paper deadlines I saw many students. Otherwise it was quite hard to get them to use this opportunity (a common problem at Amherst). After some weeks of an empty office during office hours, I decided to have one of them in the coffee shop/snack bar on campus. This worked well. The students found the more informal setting more easily accessible and would sit and chat for a while. In general, Amherst students are considered quiet, both inside and outside of class. They are not known for demonstrations or activism, nor for rowdiness or loudness. I found, however, that with a little prompting, it was easy to engage most of the Amherst students in lively and stimulating discussions.

Amherst College is part of what is called the “Five College Consortium”, a structured organization of colleges in the area, which involves being able to take classes and use the libraries of all five colleges. Some faculty would say that they liked having some Hampshire-students (a more progressive, radical college from the 1970’s) in class as they often created livelier discussions. I had two Hampshire students and one student from UMass (University of Massachusetts) in class.

Having heard about the quiet students, I spent quite some time during the first class discussing with the students what makes a good climate for conversation. I worked with this from several angles, and included it in getting-to-know-each-other activities. Many said later that they appreciated this very much, and I think it meant a lot. The dominant American discussion culture (and paper writing

culture) is about arguing your case. It is less about reflecting over a problem, which we in Scandinavia focus stronger. I wanted the class to be a community where we did not seek to convince others that we were right, but to develop ideas together. As a group, I pointed out, we are not looking for the right answers, but for the good questions. We are creating a background and horizon for articulating probing questions that open up for unknown futures.

This problem- and question oriented approach was also echoed in the paper writing. Many found it unfamiliar to articulate their own problems. They were more used to being provided with a problem to solve/argue for a thesis. Many were worried about doing it “wrong”, and I spent quite a lot of time helping them to think more about what they themselves were interested in developing and discussing than what they thought I wanted to see. This, of course, raises pedagogic challenges – in Amherst as well as at home. Thus, these challenges are not new to me, but the experience from teaching in a different context highlightet certain aspects of communcation of expectations to a written text.

On the one hand, I want the students to develop a self-assuredness and the confidence to make their own (informed) choices when it comes to interpretation, analysis and discussion. Too many criteria for correct academic work may take the joy out of writing and discovering, and may lead to students striving to reproduce *my* ideal text. Thus the writing (and thinking) process becomes one of living up to my demands and less helping the students to be creative, critical thinkers who are expected to be accountable for their own work. On a more prosaic note, I was also worried that my instructions would be very different from other teachers’, and felt insecure as to what was considered “normal”. Asking around, I found that the individual freedom of each teacher was great, and I became more confident in expressing my own instructions.

On the other hand, too loose instructions may create an unproductive insecurity, counter to the intention of the writing process. Further, open-ended instructions may create a free space for the already confident and academically secure students, while the less experienced or academically literate students get few guidelines with which to improve their writing skills. One way to resolve this dilemma is of course to provide extensive and *individual* guidance during the process, and to give thorough feed back. With a large class this may prove difficult. The concrete result in my case was to spent a good deal of class time talking about possible ways to go about the task of designing and writing the paper, as well as offering time to talk (which some used) and to providing a peer review session in which they could discuss each others very different texts and thus become more aware of their own choices. Looking back, however, I wish I had engaged the very good writing center Amherst provides for students and faculty. I realized only too late how much they can help articulate assignment instructions. I had some interesting conversations with them, but too late in the semester.

All in all I was very pleased with the written work the students produced, both in the logs, the papers and in the film reviews. I also enjoyed being able to integrate work with their writing skills with the class work we were doing. I particularly enjoyed this as I find it difficult in the context of the courses I teach in Sweden. In our department we have a long way to go when it comes to integration of writing in the learning process. Too often our written texts (to the degree that they exist before the larger thesis) become less a means to learn than a vehicle for communicating a specific content.

A final rewarding experience from the course work was a very successful visit to the college art museum, The Mead. They have faculty at the museum who, in dialogue with class teachers, create very interesting opportunities for classes to work with course problems in art. For my course, we spent a class session in the museum studying the relationship between form and content, specifically to do with artwork in which issues of time and space were relevant perspectives of study. Both the students and I enjoyed the excursion to the museum, and it inspired me to think of possible ways to use more of Uppsala University's museums in class work.

Life Outside of the Classroom

Life at Amherst did not only consist of me and my course work. I attended faculty and department meetings, lunched and enjoyed interesting conversations with a variety of teachers and staff from Amherst College and the Five College consortium. I visited a variety of lectures, lunches and other gatherings with both pedagogic, social and academic interest. I took part in *Convocation*, the formal opening of the semester in which the College President, Biddy Martin, held an excellent and inspirational speech. It took some time to find my feet in all of this, but looking back I realise how much I learned from these experiences of a more or less formal nature.

The semester at Amherst was, according to many faculty, quite extraordinary and somewhat dramatic with three major happenings. One unfortunate situation occurred at the beginning of the semester, when a member of faculty who was up for Tenure was found guilty of severe academic misconduct, i.e. plagiarism. This was, of course, sad both for the person in question and for the college. The faculty member had been a loved teacher, and several students and faculty raised the question of whether or not this might be a consequence of a very competitive society where signs of weakness or uncertainty are not tolerated. The discussion was low key, but I heard it surface several times during the semester and it tied in with one of the other major situations that the semester gave rise to.

In October a former student wrote a very moving and harrowing account of sexual assault by a fellow student several years earlier. Sadly, much of the story raised questions about the way the woman's

experience had been handled by the College. The article created massive outrage, and the normally so quiet Amherst students, in particular the young women, were actively engaged in an all-compassing discussion. During a few weeks there was talk of nothing else. For the first time since issues of Civil Rights had been treated in the 1960's, all classes were cancelled one Friday for a "Day of Dialogue" – lectures and conversations around campus for all students, faculty and staff. The Day of Dialogue became an important part of a lively and (for the most) a productive process in which Biddy Martin took a major leading role showing herself to be not only a smooth administrator but also a wise leader.

The themes of the campus discussions extended from issues of sexual assault to a wider range of issues concerning equality, discrimination and community. Further, the phrase "Amherst Awkward" surfaced, an expression which raised awareness of the insecurity of students and the competitive atmosphere of "perfect" college life. For me as an outsider, I was relieved to see the shiny exterior tear for a while, and to see how the voices of the vulnerable, unhappy, scared and insecure sides of each student's life could find a space to be expressed – and through this, possibly seen and handled in a way which would mean that Amherst college really and truly in the future might be able to speak about a "well rounded education". Amherst, under the leadership of Biddy Martin, has during this semester taken a few more steps towards becoming a community of whole, integrated human beings. Or at least one hopes this is the case.

Finally, one of the big and current discussions at college was whether or not to join the explosive (global) development of online teaching, in particular the question of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). The college had been invited by several consortia to join their projects. This was a dominant theme at the faculty meetings I attended, and a theme for several lunches and gatherings. I was able to offer my experience from online teaching in Uppsala at a lunch focused on positive and negative experiences gained by myself and another member of faculty with online teaching experience. The theme for the discussion was interesting in itself, and it was also interesting to follow the discussion about procedure in the faculty meeting: how does college cope with major decisions such as this? The situation at the time I left was still not resolved, and I shall be interested to follow the development.

Privately, as a family, the experience of a semester in Amherst has for the most part been excellent. The public schools of Amherst are good, and the local community a delight to stay in. We were lucky to be able to experience Halloween, Thanksgiving, elections and the Holidays (Christmas, for our sake) in a friendly environment with kind neighbours and new found friends.

Experience Impact

When I in 2005 came from Norway and started teaching in Sweden, I was impressed with my Swedish students, and at the time I perceived Swedish higher education to be a more structured and quality oriented endeavour than the Norwegian counterpart. I know now that the image was rose tinted. However, it was also true in some ways. But mostly, the systems were different. The experience probably made me more critical of Norway and Norwegian students than was warranted, but on the up-side I can now see that in my elation I then saw and appreciated good things in the Swedish system which I tend to take for granted and sometimes dislike now. In Amherst, I often recalled my feelings from that first semester in Sweden, sensing that I was on a “second honeymoon”. I decided to enjoy my fascination, I'd let the students get the benefit of me seeing them as brilliant and chose to let myself mentally vent some frustration over Swedish higher education. This approach is echoed in my report, and I am well aware that life as a teacher at Amherst College might not be heaven, neither as a pedagogue nor as a researcher.

There are many things I have learned and reflected over, both personally as a teacher, but also with regard to larger scale issues in higher education. Some of these are reflected in the chapter above. I'd like to conclude my report by concentrating on a few aspects of my learning, which I think will have a significant impact on my work back at home.

First of all, at the new faculty lunch I was invited to at the beginning of the semester, it was stressed that the most popular teachers are those who place high demands on their students. A teacher who believes that the students are capable and competent and wisely acts upon this belief can be an empowering force in students lives. However, high expectations of the students must be accompanied by high standards of pedagogics. My hope for discussions about pedagogics at my home institution might integrate more of an understanding that good pedagogics is not to bring down academic standards or to treat the students as children. It is not simply about making things easier for the students; i.e. explaining difficult content in a simplified manner. Good pedagogics is to make sure the students *change* from their experience of learning, and to focus *learning* ahead of *content*. Knowledge is important, but it must be understood as one of many means to learning. Good pedagogics is to provide society with a new generation of citizens and human beings who are equipped to go where we, their seniors (not necessarily age-wise) have not managed to go. It is to help the students digest difficult material in order for all their new knowledge to be assimilated in their identities. My Amherst experience has highlighted and intensified the challenge of believing that the students can do better than they ever thought, and to help the students understand the relevance of this for themselves.

The second insight I would like to stress is the positive experience of being able to “own” my own course and time to a larger extent. The Amherst faculty work extremely hard, but I saw more of a synergy effect of the different aspects of their work, as mentioned earlier. This is something I would like to contribute to in my own context: to find ways for faculty to reduce the stress of a multitude of tasks which go in different directions. This, I think, will enhance the enjoyment and productivity of my own life and those of many of my colleagues.

Finally, I have been inspired by the continuous and often intense discussions about the future of higher education in the face of global online learning. I see a great need for engaging in the often complicated and difficult but at the same time exciting and revolutionary process which is raging the universities of the world (albeit less so in Sweden than in many other countries). We are facing a situation in which much of what we know and many of the traditions we have are being challenged, for better and for worse. How do we cope?

Thank you