

STINT Teaching Sabbatical Final Report

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At

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Expression of gratitude

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and thanks to STINT for providing support to make this sabbatical possible and to the National University of Singapore for so expertly receiving me. So many people were of help. I would like especially to thank the following people for sharing their knowledge and taking me in as part of the Department of Psychology: Professors Sim Tick Ngee, Konstadina Giva, Stuart Derbyshire, Oliver Suendermann, and Melvin J. Yap; and the Department of Medical Psychology: Professor John Wong, Dr. Priya Suganhi, Professor Rathi Mahendram, and all of the psychologists in the department.

Introduction

I made a dramatic reflection during my teaching sabbatical: engaging students is critical for their learning. Many modern programs to improve teaching focus on using technology, while others emphasize teaching methodology to enhance learning. During my teaching sabbatical however, I found that both are dependent on engaging students. When students get involved, the classroom “pops” and the learning process becomes visible. Engagement is the common denominator.

I encountered another striking factor which I believe truly facilitates engagement, namely, respect. While I was previously aware that we teachers need capitalize on the different ways students learn, my discovery entailed other aspects. Coming from different cultural, economic and religious backgrounds, students and staff demonstrated what for me was a new form of respect. It goes far beyond “tolerance” to a strategy that truly takes advantage of diversity to enhance learning and treats students as an esteemed person quite capable of learning!

More about these discoveries later. In this report I will provide some background as to my placement, the duties I had, some observation, and finally some principles learned that might be applied in Sweden. These recommendations are divided into various levels from my own teaching, to my own department and university as well as to universities in Sweden.

A journey typically stimulates thought, alters our daily routines, and challenges some of the beliefs that we hold. Having a teaching sabbatical influenced all of these and has resulted in some ideas and suggestions for incorporating new, successful, and different ways of working with education and research at the university level.

Background, placement, and preparation

As my expertise is in clinical and medical psychology, I was matched with the National University of Singapore which currently has nearly 40 000 students and is ranked 12th in the world by QS World University Rankings. Students pay fees to attend, currently about 190 000:SEK per year for a new undergraduate student the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Given my background I was placed in two quite different departments at the National University of Singapore: the *Department of Psychology* and the *Department of Medical Psychology*. The former is in the Faculty of Arts and Science while the latter is in the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

Geographically they are located on opposite sides of campus as Medical Psychology serves the National University of Singapore Hospital. In April of 2016 I spent a week visiting these departments to plan activities for the fall semester. Although my visit was mainly conducted in the Department of

Medical Psychology, it was decided that I would split my time with approximately 80% in the Department of Psychology and 20% in the Department of Medical Psychology.

The Department of Psychology runs various educational programs. One important program is the undergraduate psychology track. This is a three year education which also has an option for a so-called “honors year” where students work on a research project with a staff tutor and take more advanced courses. A second program is the clinical psychology track. This is a master’s level professional education that leads to becoming a clinical psychologist. It includes advanced courses and considerable practical work tied to various clinics including a “student” clinic at the university. Finally, the department runs a doctoral program and has an impressive record of research activities.

The Department of Medical Psychology also is involved in various educational activities. The department is an integral part of the education of medical students and offers medical students in year 4 a 6 week module in psychiatry and medical psychology. In addition, the department participates in the National Psychiatry Residency Program. Thus, it runs rotations and seminars to fulfill residency requirements for specialization in psychiatry. Finally, the department is active in providing clinical services, continuing education and has a vibrant research agenda.

Activities during the term

As a staff member, I participated in a variety of teaching and departmental activities. Since my placement was in two departments, the tasks were also distributed across them.

A primary task was co-teaching a module entitled *Patient and Health Care* which attracted 37 psychology majors in their third or fourth year of study. This course was held in a center for education (rather than the department) and it took advantage of an “active classroom”. This classroom had stations and was complete with extensive white boards and the latest technology. Indeed, the Department of Psychology participated in a program for advancing “blended” learning where technology, e.g. putting lectures and other materials on-line was to be blended with classroom tasks that stimulate learning e.g. working in small groups.

In addition, I was involved in the clinical psychology program. First, I visited several classes and teachers to observe how the professional courses were organized and executed. Second, I taught or co-taught single sessions in particular courses e.g. psychopathology and clinical treatment methods. Finally, I was involved at the student clinic. This entailed visiting the clinic several times and participating in events e.g. workshops there. I also met with the director of the clinic for stimulating discussions about the professional program and ways to develop such programs.

As a member of staff I also attended meetings and workshops at the department. For example, I attend staff meetings for teachers. Also, I attended workshops and research seminars (brown-bag seminars) held weekly to stimulate academic work.

At the Department of Medical Psychology I was integrated into their academic endeavors. Consequently, I conducted a seminar for medical students during their round at the department. In addition, I conducted a seminar for residents in psychiatry. I was honored to be invited to speak at the Asia Pacific Psycho-Oncology Network meeting hosted by my department. As a staff member I was also active in professional development e.g. participating in meeting for the clinical psychologists at the clinic and in planning developmental projects. This entailed meeting various staff members and working on plans for improving care. It also provided an opportunity to visit a wide-variety of clinics and wards at the hospital.

Finally, I arranged visits at several places of interest. One example, is that I visited the Center for Development of Teaching and Learning to discuss teaching methods (more below). Another was a visit to the sleep research laboratories at Duke NUS at Singapore Hospital.

Lessons Learned

The take-home messages I developed during my stay revolve around three themes: engagement, respect, and scholarship.

Engagement. I discovered that engaging students is necessary for successful learning and this requires engaged teachers. One key factor was the release and discussion of a report evaluating the Department of Psychology's blended learning initiative which occurred at the beginning of term. With encouragement from the Dean and University, economic support was available for teachers who volunteered to join this program. A course was provided by the Center for Development of Teaching and Learning and technical tools made available for executing it. In part the Center for Instructional Technology provided support for using new technology and the active education center was made available with classrooms designed for active, blended learning. A formal evaluation was conducted by a small group of staff members and presented at various meetings and made available electronically. Contrary to expectations, the results showed virtually no positive changes as a result of incorporating blended learning. While some parts of the initiative were appreciated by students and faculty, no actual gains in achieving learning goals were noted. Moreover, both students and staff found that the blended learning took more time. Thus, incorporating technology was not a simple answer.

At the same time, I observed other classes where the role of engagement was clearly underscored. Both students and teachers were visibly engaged. Here the teachers included students by providing materials that required their

input. Sometimes this was in the form of questions or a demonstration conducted by the teacher while at other times it was in the form of an exercise in small groups or for clinical students, role play. Engagement involved having students learn by an experience that they then reflect upon. Teachers were engaged by providing carefully planned materials and exercises as well as sharing their personal experiences e.g. from research or the clinic. While technology or pedagogic tricks can assist, close teacher-student contact and well-planned activities that require students to experience and reflect seem central.

The Center for Development of Teaching and Learning generously assisted me in applying this to my own personal teaching. Furthermore, I have prepared an innovation aimed at improving feedback by using case analyses and repeated exam exercises (see below).

Respect. An impressive aspect of teaching at the university was the high degree of respect shown between teachers, between students, and between teachers and students. This likely mirrors the respect that Singapore fosters given its cultural diversity. (One message was: *We have different roots and backgrounds; we have one future.*). Tied to respect is the idea of accommodation and flexibility. Rather than seeing diversity (e.g. culturally in terms of language skills, or incoming knowledge level) as a problem, it was apparently seen as a given baseline. Teachers gaged this and accommodated their class to reach the learning objectives. Note that this did not mean lowering the standard of the learning objectives, but rather changing the methods to ensure reaching them. Moreover, teachers often capitalize on cultural difference by consulting students who possess such unique knowledge e.g. how a Hindu might react to a particular interview question.

Scholarship and a whole person view of students. Singapore has a long history of multicultural influence since it has been a large port of trade for centuries. Thus, its views on scholarship are also multicultural but heavily colored by Asian thinking. Ideas about scholarship stem to a significant degree from Chinese thinkers e.g. Confucius who saw it as a product of learning, reflection and the participation in reading, music and art to expand perspective and train thinking. Significantly, living a relatively simple life with the highest moral standards was an integral part.

I hear echoes of this historical view of scholarship in how research and teaching is approached. Staff seem to be interested in the development of the whole student as a vital part of career development and I observed this in how the university catered to broader aspects. In research, this broader perspective was also apparent. While acutely aware of barometers of success, it appears that scholarship is seen as involving more than a large number of publications. As per tradition, a scholar should be humble in the face of the great library of knowledge! Moreover, because scholars traditionally share their experiences, teaching is as important as continually

learning. This is mirrored in that every member of the faculty teaches, in about equal amounts, and their contact with students was valued in a variety of ways.

Comparisons between NUS and Örebro University

A journey entails comparisons: how does this environment contrast with my own at home? One major observation was that most of the issues brought up in the classroom as well as at meetings during my stay were similar to those at home. Dealing with examinations, engaging students, being fair, utilizing resources, revamping and improving the educational programs are all examples of such issues. So, while I will highlight some differences below, I felt that the similarities greatly outweighed the differences.

Compared to Örebro University, the National University of Singapore is a master at maintenance and quality control. It is highly structured, well-organized and keenly interested in successful initiatives. This was reflected in the number of support staff. Just as a road might be maintained by periodic evaluation and scheduled procedures, evaluation and follow up were an integral part of the university and procedures ranging from IT and pedagogical support to more specific matters e.g. grant applications and contact with the ministries governing education and research. Considering the maintenance of initiatives provided for long term planning and appropriate financing. This means that programs have continuity rather than being a single “point” program such as is often initiated in Sweden.

While many teachers are interested in how students at the National University may differ from Swedish students, I found it more interesting to focus on teachers. Indeed, the students are well-prepared for studies at the university, work hard, and are wonderful to work with, just as is often the case in Sweden. Teachers in Singapore however, seemed to be quite engaged in their teaching. They regularly attended meetings, appeared very dedicated to making their classes interesting and helping students achieve their goals. This may reflect that the department was progressive in initiating blended learning. It may also be related to the fact that staff are periodically peer reviewed specifically concerning their teaching. This means that teachers discuss their work with students with peers, such as their department head, and receive formal feedback and a grade. Good grades are rewarded while poor grades necessitate a plan for improvement.

In turn, this is related to a relatively well developed system of evaluation. Student feedback is captured in questionnaires and teaching methods are observed directly or indirectly. Two centers support the development of teaching methods and are also utilized in developing evaluation. For example, computerized ratings and written views can be obtained during a course to help teachers accommodate students' views.

Teachers at the departments I was attached to were encouraged to continually develop their competence as teachers and teaching excellence was highlighted. My sense was that teaching was highly valued and excellence awards were given on various levels e.g. by the department, faculty and university. In fact, teaching awards were visible via the University's webpage, emails, department meetings, and advertised with banners etc. There was considerable activity in initiating modern teaching methods and excellent teachers became fellows in the Teaching Academy whose mission is to promote teaching and learning innovation in a balanced culture of educational and research excellence.

An interesting initiative at the National University is the *Simulator Laboratory*. This is a center where teachers and students can meet in order to develop practical clinical skills. In short, the center has professional actors and actresses who can role play to facilitate skill development. This laboratory may be used with students in clinical programs e.g. psychology to practice the application of new techniques before using them with actual patients. This was ideal for many modules where skills practice is essential and it was perfect for workshops focusing on various inter-personal situations (e.g. dealing with an angry patient; using exposure for phobias).

Although research seemed more prestigious than teaching at the National University, staff were nevertheless regularly evaluated on teaching and they were encouraged to promote teaching and learning excellence. There was also a focus on developing a balance between teaching and research. Thus, there appeared to be a more even balance between research and teaching than at ÖU or probably most universities in Sweden.

A last contrast concerns developing team work. Although Singapore might be considered a country where the group is more in focus than the individual, I believe there is more team work in teaching and research at Örebro University. At the Department of Psychology, one teacher was usually in charge of a course (module) and did virtually all of the teaching for it, while we often have several teachers involved. Moreover, many researchers had their own lab. While cooperation was quite evident, I believe we have more opportunities for collaboration especially across disciplines. For example, at Örebro University we have several research environments or centers where groups of researchers work together. This appears to me to be an efficient and stimulating way to promote excellent research and it also helps to create opportunities for research to inform teaching.

Action Plan Recommendations

An important objective of the STINT program is to stimulate innovation in teaching and learning. Therefore, I am listing a number of suggestions, based on my experiences, that I believe would improve education in Sweden.

These are quite varied in nature. Some of them can be done on a personal level by me or other teachers. Others are aimed at the departmental or university level. Many require smaller amounts of work to accomplish, while others require more work and a longer time frame. I present them here organized by the appropriate organizational level.

Personally

Below are ideas that I am personally developing for innovation in my own teaching.

- Students benefit from feedback, but most feedback is provided at the end of a course when there is little opportunity for the student to alter and improve. Therefore, I am initiating an examination system that provides feedback from the first day of course through to the final examination. It involves developing a system for baseline and practice exams based on a format that is congruent with the case analyses and which includes all of the learning objectives.
- To improve teaching we need evaluation. Thus, I am committed to receiving and providing “peer review” at my department. To this end, we have started a program (critical friends) that assists teaching colleagues in providing helpful feedback.
- To provide innovation in the area of active learning and engaging the students I am initiating so-called “alternating teaching” where presentations are alternated with exercises and application (exercises help students to understand by applying; discussion of them help students learn by reflecting).
- To structure the above teaching method, I will use “case analyses” where case studies are used to engage students in discuss, role play, etc.

Department

These suggestions are at the departmental level since they can be applied to a variety of courses and activities and require a broader initiative. Here are my suggestions:

- Promote teaching excellence in more ways. The department should, for example, provide more feedback to teachers and underscore the importance of teaching e.g. by awarding excellence.
- Actively shape respect. Activities need to be used to shape respect between students as well as between staff and students. This is

complex so that several short activities may be used. For example, one activity might be how we address others and another understanding other value systems.

- Establish a “Wall of Gratitude”. Students and staff are trained in critical thinking. At the National University they were also schooled in gratitude. At Psychology there was a Wall of Gratitude where students or others could express their appreciation for various things e.g. a certain class, a teacher, an administrator, or classmates.
- Establish a direct pathway for clinical psychology students to enter and obtain a doctorate. The clinical profession needs to improve in this age of evidenced-based practice. And, teachers are needed who have both clinical skills and researcher skills. Rather than having to leave the university to complete clinical training and then apply to a doctoral program, I propose that clinical students should be able to choose a “research” pathway early on that results in a doctorate. This would be a form of “seamless” education that combines the clinical and doctoral programs.
- Initiate an exchange program between the National University of Singapore and Örebro to promote internationalization. Because both universities have clinical programs that are similar, this offers a unique opportunity for an exchange. For example, students might visit for shorter periods of time and focus on clinical aspects e.g. attending case conferences and selected courses. Moreover, the educational and cultural diversity seen at these universities can be an exceptional basis for exchange knowledge, techniques, and thoughts about issues in the clinic.

Örebro University

The university could benefit from my STINT visit by:

- Creating a smoke-free university. I was embarrassed to find that Örebro University are behind when it comes to promoting this aspect of student (and employee) health. This is so concrete and important.
- Promoting student health and learning environments. Students often encounter various health issues during their studies. This recommendation involves planning and promoting excellent, healthy environments. This is seen in programs for such things as stress, sleep, and physical activity and study environments.

- Create a simulation center. Working with simulated patients (or other players) is important for applying knowledge and developing skills. A center providing access to professional actors is an innovative way to improve on this educational experience.
- Create a Teaching Academy. The academy may oversee a range of activities.
 - Organizing teaching excellence awards (e.g. each term)
 - Selection of fellows for the Academy e.g. via applications
 - Developing an evaluation system to provide teachers with feedback
 - Promoting the integration of research and teaching
- Provide economic support for teaching initiatives. An important roadblock for innovation is cost. This concerns both investments in objects and in time. Small grants would stimulate teachers to innovate.
- Create a Doctoral education in psychology track for clinicians. Provide a clear seamless pathway in order to improve excellence in the program. (see above)
- Make English our collective language to promote internationalization. The National University uses English as the official language. This made internationalization so much easier and opens doors for other collaboration in the classroom as well as the laboratory.
- Promote teaching that uses research experiences to enrich the classroom. Although doing research does not automatically improve teaching, it can serve as an important base. Promoting the use of a teacher's own research in the classroom can provide cutting edge learning experiences that are enlivened by the teacher's hands-on experiences. This might be promoted by sharing experiences and rewarding those who demonstrate excellence.

Swedish research and education

At the national level several steps could be taken to improve teaching and learning. These are also connected to the above suggestions since they would help set priorities and provide economic directives.

- Enhanced teaching excellence recognition.

- Support for teaching and learning innovation. Provide for financial support for worthy applications concerning innovation.
- Incorporate the English language to enhance internationalization.
- Develop a doctoral education track in psychology for clinicians
- Promote the integration of research and teaching.