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Ohio State University

STINT Teaching Sabbatical, Fall 2016

Final report

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University

I spent the fall semester 2016 at the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) at the Ohio State University (OSU) in Columbus, Ohio. OSU is a large university, with almost 60,000 students on the Columbus campus. At WGSS I taught a graduate course of my own making, on language, gender, and sexuality. As a linguist, it was a challenging and most rewarding experience to find myself in a different academic tradition, that of gender studies.

## Preparation and planning

I had a first Skype meeting at the beginning of 2016, with the Interim Chair, Guisela Latorre, the Administrative Manager, Lynaya Elliott, and the Program Coordinator, Jackie Stotlar. It was a highly positive and instructive meeting. We then communicated via email during the spring semester, for the planning of my course and regarding paperwork. I found the department and OSU highly organized and efficient, well prepared for visiting scholars, and always helpful and friendly.

I spent one week in April at OSU, meeting the Chair, the staff, and some of my future colleagues. The week was well planned in advance, also including activities that I had suggested. I attended the seminars of two teachers, was given a tour of the campus, had meetings with various people, was taken to dinner, attended a public lecture, had lunch with graduate students, and also had time to go house hunting and explore the city of Columbus.

During the summer, I put together the syllabus for my course, and received helpful feedback from the Program Coordinator, the Interim Chair and the new Chair, Shannon Winnubst. I arrived in Columbus, Ohio, a little over three weeks before the start of the course, which gave me enough time to get acquainted with everything, prepare the start of my teaching, take an introductory course on the learning management system used by OSU, and publish my course digitally, for the students. That time also enabled me to take care of all of the practical arrangements that are involved in moving to a different country.

## Tasks and responsibilities

My main task at the department was to teach one course. I was given the option of teaching either at undergraduate or graduate level, or a hybrid course. I chose to give a graduate course. I was also given full responsibility for the content of the course, and I took this opportunity to put together my “dream course” on language, gender, and sexuality, which eventually got the name *Queer Linguistics*. Preparing the syllabus during the summer involved structuring the course, selecting topics and literature, constructing assignments, and determining course requirements and how much different course requirements were to contribute to the overall grade.

The course was also advertised outside of the department, and at the beginning of the semester, ten graduate students, from WGSS as well as from several other departments, started the course. They also all completed the course. Teaching consisted of one three-hour seminar per week, from the end of August through early December. In accordance with the instructions I had been given by the department, the seminars were heavily focused on literature discussions, with attendance and informed participation from all students being part of the course requirements. I was instructed to expect everyone to contribute to every seminar. For each seminar, the students were to read 200–300 pages of course literature, which for my course typically meant research articles. As I had chosen to set literature that was mainly new also for me, and as I had to know all the material well to be able to discuss it with the students, I spent the bulk of each week reading and preparing for my class. This in itself – having the time to include so much new literature and to read and prepare it well – was a great benefit of the teaching sabbatical. Every week I also kept office hours, which several of the students chose to make use of.

As the final project that I had set for the course involved all students recording conversational data with participants, I spent quite some time at the beginning of the semester learning about the ethical requirements of research with human subjects at OSU, to know whether the students would need IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval for their projects or not. To this end, I completed an online course on Human Research, and I met with a representative from the Office of Responsible Research Practices.

I included two guest lecturers in my course, who gave one seminar each. One of these lecturers came from another department at OSU, and the other one from a different U.S. university. Both of these seminars were successful, and provided useful perspectives on the course.

I was responsible for all the grading. The grading scale was *A*, *A-*, *B+*, *B*, *B-*, etc., where *A* meant that the student had done everything that was expected of them in the course. Thus, there is no way of conveying an outstanding achievement through the grading system. This is instead done through individual comments to the student. The expected grade for a graduate student is an *A*, and a grade *B* should be seen as questioning what the student is doing in graduate school. After I had set all the grades for my students, weighing up their contributions to all the different course activities, I scheduled a meeting with the present and former Chairs, on my initiative, to discuss the grades before reporting them.

## Other activities

In addition to teaching my own course, I involved myself in other activities at the department and the university. I participated in departmental activities such as a faculty meeting (these were held once a month), a departmental open house for students, and the departmental holiday party in December. I attended research seminars organized by the department, and I attended several of the So(ciolinguistics) Mean(ing) seminars at the Department of Linguistics, as well as other seminars at the university. I was involved with the students of beginner's Swedish, participating in informal conversations in Swedish and being interviewed by students for one of their assignments, and I made contact with Disability Studies at OSU.

I gave one open lecture about my research, also presenting my home institution and STINT. I organized a public lecture with the external guest lecturer. Attending the classes of other teachers at the department was also something that I did, and this gave me highly valuable insights into different ways of organizing teaching and the classroom. I participated in initial discussions between Linnaeus University and OSU about a possible student and teacher exchange agreement, and other colleagues are now continuing the work on this agreement.

## Important lessons

I will here discuss some important lessons that I have learned, regarding student participation and teaching at graduate level, and peer teaching observation.

### *Student participation and teaching at graduate level*

As my semester was first and foremost devoted to giving a graduate course, what I most of all learned was in relation to discussion-based seminars and teaching graduate students. Every week I found myself in the challenging and stimulating role of facilitating research discussions between highly competent graduate students. I spent time between classes reflecting on this role, and on how to find the right balance between, on the one hand, preparing and steering the discussion, and on the other hand, letting the students lead. In class I found that I had to be a very active listener, attentive both to the content of the discussion and to the way the discussion developed between the students. In class I also had to ensure that my own contributions enabled both the discussion of the topics that I had prepared beforehand, and for emerging topics to be met with the care and engagement that they deserved, and to be allowed to be developed. In the course evaluations at the end of the course, I received very positive comments overall for my instruction, with some students even commenting that it was perfect and no improvement was needed, while some students had other views and identified room for improvement, and gave me valuable suggestions for changes. I have come to see this – teaching through discussion-based seminars at advanced levels – as a fine art that it probably takes many years to master.

I organized the seminars so that all students should read all the literature in advance of each seminar, and prepare topics for discussion. This worked well, and I found the students highly ambitious and very good at critical reading, reflection, and discussion. For some seminars I also gave an introductory lecture of about 30–45 minutes. Early on in the course I learned that having a full three-hour seminar entirely devoted to literature discussion is not very successful, and I therefore made sure to split seminars into different parts, and always to include some other activity during each seminar, such as a mini-lecture from me, student presentations, or practical exercises using empirical material that we worked on together.

Another aspect of this teaching setup, which I worked with and from which I have learned a great deal, is how to encourage equal participation from all students in the classroom. Some students contributed a great deal in the classroom, other students a medium amount, and yet others very little. By requiring all students to prepare something for every class in advance, I wanted to make sure that all felt that they had something to say in the classroom. In class I then sometimes let the students contribute on their own initiative, and sometimes I called on students to speak. At times I initiated topics for anyone to address, and sometimes I gave a specific topic to a particular student. For one seminar I split the readings

between the students, so that they were to be responsible for the discussion of one particular paper. However, that unfortunately had the effect that they hardly read the other papers, which made the discussion suffer, so I dropped that idea. In this class, I believe that student participation correlated in part with disciplinary background, so that students with a specific background had an advantage that other students didn't have. Effects of this were hard to avoid, but I was most aware of it, and I tried to connect topics to the discussion that would enable all students to use and show their expertise, sometimes by asking questions to specific students. Overall, students came well prepared to class and made contributions to class of very high quality.

Attending graduate seminars of colleagues gave me an invaluable view of how they structured and led discussions. I also attended undergraduate classes, and here learned another aspect of student participation. A teacher having a class of 40–50 students was able to base the teaching on students reading material in advance and then having a classroom discussion where at least half of the students participated, that is, more of a seminar format than a lecture setting, which contrasts with what I would typically see at home. Talking to teachers I also learned about how they used a number of different methods to enable students to be active and participate, also in ways other than speaking to the whole class.

### *Peer teaching observation*

At WGSS they used peer teaching observations in a systematic way that I found highly interesting. I met with Professor and former Chair Jill Bystydzienski to learn more about this.

Peer teaching observations are made once a year of all teachers, with the exception of full professors, who are expected to have attained sufficient pedagogical skills. Teaching observations are used for tenure and promotion, that is, as documentation to be used when someone is applying for tenure, and for promotion within the tenure system from associate to assistant to full professor. Four peer observations are needed to apply for tenure. For more junior teachers, teaching observations are used for making decisions about awards. Teaching observations are also used to ensure the quality of education, as a way of meeting organizational requirements of teaching evaluations. Teaching observations thus act in two ways: for the individual teacher to prove their pedagogical skills and to enable them to develop as teachers (this latter point, both through being observed and through observing others), and for the organization (department, university) to gain insight into the teaching that is carried out and to ensure educational quality.

At WGSS, different pairings of observer-observed are assigned every year. Together they arrange a suitable class for the observation. The department has no explicit guidelines for what to observe, but relies on an informal consensus on what to look for. This includes:

- participation and the student-centered classroom: how much students are engaged,
- how well the teacher covers the material,
- whether the teacher uses a mini-lecture or some kind of material in the classroom,
- the pace and how things are broken up,
- how good the teacher is at conducting a discussion in the classroom: how the teacher brings in other students into the conversation to avoid one-to-one exchanges, how students who don't speak are activated to do so, how the teacher responds to student questions,
- what kind of atmosphere there is in the classroom,
- whether differences between students are respected,
- how the class is wrapped up: whether and how the main points are being summarized, how the class is tied to previous classes, whether something is said about what is coming next.

The observer takes notes, and then writes a letter. At WGSS, this letter should focus on constructive criticism. The letter is a public document, so emphasis is placed on it being written as well as possible. The letter will mention how something might be improved, but any specific criticism and serious problems are rather dealt with outside of the letter, by talking to the teacher, and involving the Chair and various resources if needed. Jill Bystydzienski emphasizes that WGSS has good teachers, who are interested and engaged, who are eager to try new things and who get good evaluations from students. The excellence and high level of engagement among WGSS teachers is also something that I clearly saw during my stay at the department. As just one sign of this, graduate students at the department have been highly successful in receiving the university's graduate teaching awards.

## Comparison between the foreign and home institutions

One of my main reasons for applying for a STINT Teaching Sabbatical was a concern about the often highly marginalized position that is given to teaching and pedagogy at Swedish universities. I sought to learn about how teaching can be realized and valued differently. During my semester at OSU, it became clear to me that the relationship between research and

teaching at OSU was very much the same as at Linnaeus University: research takes precedence. This was stated explicitly to me on some occasions, and I saw it in practice in several different ways. For instance, research merits are valued more highly than pedagogical merits in the tenure track system in general. At the same time, I also met highly dedicated teachers at the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, who in practice seemed to give equal importance to their research and their teaching. I have found this a great source of inspiration. OSU also has two offices dedicated to pedagogical matters, and they offer a number of interesting seminars and courses for competence development. These are UCAT, the University Center for the Advancement of Teaching, and ODEE, the Office of Distance Education and eLearning. For example, ODEE organized the course on the OSU learning management system that I took before the start of the semester.

I was also interested to see how my host institution engaged with society, and this has turned out to be a very rich field, both at my particular department, WGSS, and at OSU at large. At the university level, Outreach and Engagement has its own office,<sup>1</sup> and one of three overarching goals in the OSU President Michael V. Drake's *2020Vision* plan for Ohio State concerns community engagement. During the semester I saw numerous examples of how faculty, staff, and students all over university engaged with society in different ways. As just a couple of examples of this, first, OSU collaborates with COSI, an innovative and highly popular family-oriented science center in Columbus, through research labs and other activities, with researchers and students engaging with visitors. This OSU science center at COSI is described as "where research, science, and university outreach are embedded into the fabric of everyday public, student, and family experiences".<sup>2</sup> Second, another example of university outreach is the STEAM Factory<sup>3</sup>, which facilitates interdisciplinary activities and innovation in collaboration with artists and other creatives through "diversity in action".

At WGSS, staff, faculty, and other teachers worked continuously and actively with activists and others outside of the university. The department's mailing lists and social media were used to spread information about upcoming events. As one example, together with several colleagues I participated in a *Knee for Ty're Call-to-Action* event, to commemorate Ty're King, a thirteen-year-old boy who was shot to death by a white police officer in Columbus, and to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter mobilization. In response to the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, which left many students and teachers in shock

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<sup>1</sup> <https://engage.osu.edu>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://cosi.org/about-cosi/partners>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://steamfactory.osu.edu>.



and fear, and in response to various racist and discriminatory events on and off campus, teachers initiated a number of activities, such as *Racism 101: an open conversation with white students*, organized by Professors Shannon Winnubst and Jennifer Suchland.

Finally, as a seemingly minor point but one I believe to be of high significance in the grand scheme of things, I was fully prepared not to find a *fika* culture at my host institution, but I was surprised to find that people didn't even have lunch together, nor was there any space dedicated to such communal eating. Teachers and staff typically ate something alone in front of their computer, without taking a break. Many teachers/researchers also worked from home. Although the particular department that I was at still managed to create a close-knit and very friendly environment, I can see such lack of regular and informal meeting spaces causing problems for less well-functioning departments, and I have come to value lunch breaks and *fika* more than ever.

## Looking ahead

I have returned home from my STINT Teaching Sabbatical full of inspiration and experiences, which I think will influence my actions in many, possibly indirect, ways, over the next few years. I have become more dedicated than ever to the importance of good-quality pedagogy, committed teachers, and strong organizational support for educational matters, at Swedish universities. The same also goes for the areas of internationalization and outreach.

Increasing student participation by making all students more active in the classroom, and by using varied methods, is something that I will work with even more in my own teaching. As this is something that we have also already begun working with at my home department, I expect my experiences here to be of importance also at the departmental level.

For a number of different reasons I believe that we as teachers and researchers in Sweden need to be better at outreach and engagement with society. As individuals we can take responsibility for this in different ways, but it also needs to be clear at organization levels that such activities are valued and promoted, for instance, through dedicated resources of various kinds that facilitate outreach. This may involve a separate office working specifically with outreach and engagement. A very concrete idea could be a series of inspirational talks by people who already work actively with outreach.

Having learned about the work at WGSS with peer teaching observations, I am interested to see whether this could be valuable also in a Swedish context. At the individual

level, we are often alone as teachers, and here peer teaching observations could give us valuable and useful feedback and tools for pedagogical development. At the departmental level, this could also help foster good teaching practices and more teacher collaboration, thus more coherence within and between courses. At the university level, peer teaching observations can act as one way of ensuring high-quality teaching. The written documents that peer teaching observations result in can also be used in the career systems based on pedagogical merits that are currently being implemented at Linnaeus University and other Swedish universities.

OSU, like many other universities around the world, has a sabbatical system, which allows faculty to spend a longer period away from the home institution, typically focusing on their research. Like other STINT fellows before me, I believe in the great benefits of such a system, both for enabling work focus and for giving new experiences and ideas that come with being away from one's typical surroundings.

I found teacher recruitment to be a much speedier process at WGSS/OSU than at Swedish universities. As regards internationalization and excellence in teaching and research, I fear that Swedish universities risk losing highly competent candidates within the current system for recruitment, and I believe that this matter is something that Swedish universities will need to address.

Finally, I was impressed by the emphasis that was placed on, and the organizational resources put into, research ethics at OSU.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the online course on research ethics that I took, I would be most interested in investigating the possibilities for developing something similar in a national Swedish context.

## Acknowledgement

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<sup>4</sup> Again, this had its own office: The Office of Responsible Research Practice, <http://orrrp.osu.edu>.

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