



Teaching sabbatical at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

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During the fall semester of 2015, I served as a STINT teaching fellow at the Department of English of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). The aim of my fellowship as I understood it was to become a participant-observer at my host institution and from that perspective learn as much as possible about the structures, strategies and practices that drive successful learning-and-teaching processes at CUHK. Of particular importance were, naturally, structures and activities deemed relevant and transferable to teaching and learning in Swedish higher education, for which the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE) provides my primary frame of reference, supplemented by less extensive experience of learning and teaching at Stockholm University and Uppsala University and by a more general understanding of national trends and concerns of the kind addressed at the biennial conferences on higher education hosted by the Swedish Association of Higher Education (*Sveriges universitets- och högskoleförbund*). In what follows, I address first my participant-observer role, providing there more general information about CUHK and higher education in Hong Kong wheregermane. Next, having established my role at the host institution, the report examines three themes that organize my observations on teaching and learning at CUHK and identify what takeaways seem most valuable for the continuous improvement of Swedish higher education. These themes are: a holistic vision of higher education, a strong commitment to what I call pedagogical accommodation, and pockets of curricular innovation. Finally, I close the report with a short personal reflection.

Participant-observation at CUHK

Central to my role in the department and thus in the university was, of course, my engagement with the department's teaching mission, which STINT clearly recognizes given the structure of the fellowship program. Without this engagement, I would have become simply an observer, limited to an etic perspective, but with it I was afforded a hybrid emic-and-etic perspective. My course was an elective, ENGE 2100 Research and Reporting open to undergraduates enrolled in the English Department's own programs, those enrolled in other

majors and those enrolled as international exchange students. The course places a strong emphasis on skills development, and it employs a task-based syllabus with spoken and written deliverables driving the learning processes. Each week of the 14-week term, we met for a traditional two-hour lesson; in addition, each student belonged to a tutorial group (capped at ten students) that met either with me or my teaching assistant for a 45-minute session devoted to follow-up discussions, writing workshops or student presentations.

It was by and through teaching that I could begin to learn something about CUHK students. I could see at first hand their approaches to learning, learn how they contextualized assignments and other coursework and, significantly in a language course, assess their proficiency in spoken and written English. That evolving understanding made it possible to have meaningful discussions with colleagues in the department and in other parts of the university (and even at other Hong Kong universities). Along with the activities listed below, those discussions, sometimes informal and sometimes semi-structured, provide the basis of the observations I take up in the following sections.

- Follow-up meeting with a professor of English who was not available during my April planning visit (June 2015)
- Early meetings with English department chair and senior faculty (followed up regularly throughout the semester)
- Participation in English department kick off
- Participation in the departmental student association's welcome dinner
- Regular meetings with the coordinator for communication courses and the team of instructors teaching those courses
- Classroom observations
- Participation in college-level language-enhancement activities (i.e. extra-curricular activities with English proficiency in focus)
- Paper presented in departmental research seminar series (empirical study of attitudes guiding the assessment of student writing)
- Active membership in a conference organizing committee (ICAME 37, to be hosted by CUHK in May 2016)
- Presentation at faculty-development workshop (Teaching language with cases, CUHK English Language Teaching Unit)
- Presentation at faculty development workshop (American Translingualism in Sweden and Hong Kong, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, Center for Language Education)
- Paper presented, Conference on Teaching English across the curriculum (Disciplinary difference and EAC standards, Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Holism

By holism I mean a conception of higher education that aims to support learning, growth and development across many dimensions and to this end recognizes a very wide range of student needs. This contrasts with narrower conceptions of higher education, including the narrow vocationalism that structures much of the work done in Swedish tertiary institutions. By way of illustration consider, first, the way CUHK self-identifies through its mission statement and motto.

To assist in the preservation, creation, application and dissemination of knowledge by teaching, research and public service in a comprehensive range of disciplines, thereby serving the needs and enhancing the well-being of the citizens of Hong Kong, China as a whole, and the wider world community. (CUHK website, <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/english/aboutus/mission.html>)

As befits a university, the mission focuses on knowledge, yet knowledge explicitly in the service of local, national and global communities. A significant complement to this mission statement is the university motto, a quotation from Confucius generally acknowledged to represent one of Confucianism's central tenets: "Through learning and temperance to virtue". This contrasts with, for instance, my home institution's self-identification. For decades SSE identified its mission with language adapted from its 1909 charter: "through scientific teaching and research to promote the advancement of business in our country". This has recently expanded somewhat to: "The objective of the Stockholm School of Economics is through scientific teaching and research, to strengthen Sweden's competitiveness" (<https://www.hhs.se/en/about-us/mission-and-vision/>), and while SSE has no motto, it does self-identify with language that acknowledges a broader, more holistic role: "The role of the business school is transforming into a school for society. It is a school where prejudice is replaced by insight, where new role models are formed" (<https://www.hhs.se/en/about-us/>). Nevertheless, even this more comprehensive language still falls short of the holistic aspirations expressed by CUHK.

The primary vehicle through which CUHK carries out its holistic vision of higher education is its college system. Parallel to a central university structure and a traditional disciplinary organization of faculties and departments, CUHK comprises nine colleges to which full-time students and faculty belong. In broad strokes, the colleges provide housing and restaurant facilities for students, arrange orientation programs for first-year students, organize extensive extra-curricular activities and, perhaps most importantly, supplement the university-wide general education requirements, which include physical education with a sequence of general education courses that help define each college's identity. Morningside College, for example, where I was a visiting fellow, provides one obligatory course in intellectual history

(Current Dilemmas and their Histories) and a second one on public service (Service Learning and Civic Engagement). In addition, the colleges play a substantial role in informal learning by organizing visits by scholars, authors, artists and activists. Residential colleges, like Morningside, also use communal meals to bring together students, faculty fellows and the Master (in Morningside's case a Nobel Laureate in Economics) to do the work of forming an intellectual community. Like the university as a whole, each college expresses a broad commitment to their students' growth and development. College mottos include, for instance: Scholarship, Virtue, Service (Morningside); Wisdom, Humanity, Integrity, Harmony (Lee Wo Sing); Culture, Morals, Devotion, Trustworthiness (S.H.Ho); and *Cultus et Beneficentia* (W C Chu).

Beyond the work of CUHK's colleges to create a holistic educational experience, the campus itself creates a sense of community. As expected, there are libraries, computing facilities and labs, and there is an extensive network of canteens and restaurants beyond those in the colleges. There are also several art galleries, extensive sports facilities and substantial open spaces, a rarity in much of Hong Kong. Connecting these features of the 137 hectare campus is a system of buses that run regularly and are free of charge.

This catalogue of amenities, nevertheless, fails to capture the spirit of CUHK's holistic take on education. Several colleges refer to a "pastoral" relationship with their students, and this too evokes the spirit in questions. While critics may equate this attitude with a paternalism unsuitable for higher education, I link this perspective with the service and values dimension of CUHK's mission and offer a graphic illustration of pastoral holism. This poster appears in a number of places on campus, for example in some elevators, on bulletin boards in public square and in



this case in a men's room of an academic office building. The text identifies the setting and the sender as CUHK and says, as if to the students in the foreground, "Health is Life". Across the bottom, the blue and white segments provide "9 tips to stay healthy", ranging from the brutally practical "Wash hands more" and "Drink more water" to more value-laden suggestions like "Smile more" and "Care more for others". This poster functions as one tile in a mosaic of deep public communication that also includes, for instance, many posters about sustainable campus initiatives, signs at every elevator saying "We walk up one and down two" and elaborate exhibitions and signage devoted to the birds, flora and other fauna found on the CUHK campus.

None of this is to say that CUHK or its students lack a pragmatic or an academic orientation. Students are career conscious and recognize the role academic success plays in that process. Moreover, it becomes clear after relatively little exposure to Hong Kong culture that childhood, adolescence and young adulthood are life-phases aimed at preparing for economic responsibilities. My interpretation is that the educational holism at CUHK acknowledges this economic pragmatism, but judges to be insufficient without supplementary values, culture and community.

Pedagogical accommodation

By pedagogical accommodation, I mean simply the work done by faculty to meet students wherever they may be in their learning processes vis á vis a particular subject, in terms of both prior knowledge and learning tools. This may sound simply like good pedagogy, and it is. Yet it contrasts with what I see as the prevailing practices in Swedish higher education, especially post-Bologna, where relatively standardized course descriptions and highly standardized formulas for describing intended learning outcomes codify canonized segments of disciplinary knowledge. This codification shapes assessment and instruction and creates a unidirectional learning dynamic whereby this canon remains static and learners must find their way to it, an approach that may well succeed when learners are relatively homogenous and when that homogenous student body matches the assumptions made about canonical knowledge and its uptake. In contrast, the accommodation I observed at CUHK struck me as an attractive alternative, and I offer two examples.

The first concerns a course in Anglophone literature, a subject area where course syllabi typically include long, three-part reading lists. Students can be expected to read extensively the primary literary works of a particular period, author, region or genre (depending upon how a given course is organized). In addition, there is background reading—historical, biographical, philosophical or political, again depending on specific course topics. Finally, students of literature need to engage with published literary criticism in the relevant field. These are norms developed in Anglophone countries (e.g. Great Britain, Australia, the

United States), where the majority of English Department faculty, both expatriate and local, have earned their doctorates. The accommodation comes in reconciling these norms with local realities without lowering academic standards.

Hong Kong students, as a colleague explained, have secondary educations that are relatively broad, with little specialization, which means that even English majors will have less experience with reading long literary text than, say, their Irish or Welsh counterparts. Add to this the fact that Cantonese-speaking students generally have lower English reading speeds than their peers who grow up reading English or another Germanic or even Indo-European language. The pedagogical solution at CUHK is to adapt the course to the local conditions for learning. Some of these adaptations included engaging fewer primary texts, working more extensively with excerpts, covering backgrounds and secondary criticism collectively, with substantial peer-to-peer learning, and through summary presented in various formats. In and of themselves, these methods are unremarkable. What strikes me as remarkable is the departmental faculty's accommodationist attitude that clearly foregrounds student learning and backgrounds disciplinary norms and expectations.

The second example concerns scaffolding in an English grammar course. In language departments grammar can be an ambiguous concept, and here, as part of CUHK's focus on applied linguistics, grammar teaching aims less to improve students' individual proficiency in English and more to provide tools they will later apply as language professionals working in education, publication, or communication or as civil servants. A colleague described this course as a migration, where for over a decade the transfer of knowledge about language structures and functions has moved beyond traditional lecturing and now employs a large range of written materials produced by the instructor. Working from the related observations that listening-intensive lectures taxed students and that their in-class responses suggested that this mode of instruction was not leading to an adequate understanding of grammatical reasoning, he gradually complemented his lectures with increasingly elaborate scaffolding documents, handouts that explained key principles, provided extensive examples and mapped relevant taxonomies for any given lecture. Over the same period, work with analytical exercises, with follow up in tutorial sessions, has taken on a larger role in the course than might have been the case when the same instructor taught grammar in an Anglophone country. Again, the methods are straightforward, what is noteworthy is the work of monitoring students' learning and changing one's teaching practices in response.

Curricular innovation

I focus on two types of curricular innovation. They are not the only innovations I encountered in Hong Kong, but they are particularly relevant for and transferable to language teaching at SSE, so I profile them here.

CUHK's English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) provides the compulsory English-language instruction required for all students outside the Department of English. Its innovative approach to language teaching is manifest most noticeably through disciplinary, across-the-curriculum integration. This means that in addition to general-purpose course in academic English, the ELTU offers courses developed in conjunction with faculty from particular disciplines, such as law, social work and the natural sciences. The obvious advantages of this type of course over more generic English-language instruction include the scope granted for specialization, specialized vocabulary as well as specialized genre (such as case analyses for law and business students or lab reports for science students). In addition, students share disciplinary commonalities and ostensibly common interests. Most important, however, is that this kind of innovation enables another, a potential shift in perspective from language as system—a finite set of forms wed to a parallel set of equally finite functions—to a perspective on language as local performance always tied to (and most loyal to) communities of practice and their communicative needs.

While the language-teaching specialists at CUHK have innovated primarily course content through this integration, their peers at the Center for Language Education (CLE) at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) have innovated primarily teaching and learning structures by creating curricular elements smaller than, and thus more flexible than, traditional courses. This innovation, which exists in parallel with traditional courses, includes elements of various sizes with a range of objectives.

Bundled under the cover term *iLang* for Informal Curriculum for Language Learning, these elements include short courses, activities and advising. Short courses typically comprise twelve contact hours spread over four to six days. Their content ranges from immediately practical applications, such as TOEFL or IELTS preparation and job interview skills, through less immediate practicalities, such as writing business letters and socializing in the workplace, and finally to highly generalizable skills, such as improving spoken fluency or increasing levels of linguistic accuracy. Activities allow for language improvement even for students with even less time, energy and attention to commit. They typically last one to three hours and draw on workshop or other social formats. Like some English enhancement programs at CUHK, some activities take place in students' residential settings (i.e. colleges at CU and dormitories at UST). Finally, the Center for Language Education offers instructional advising to individual students in 30-minute sessions. Topics include pronunciation, spoken fluency and various aspects of academic writing. Advising possibilities also exist for small-group discussion practice.

These language-teaching innovations are by far the observations most readily transferable to SSE and to Swedish higher education more generally.

Reflections and acknowledgements

As I hope this report suggests, my CUHK experience to date has been rewarding personally and especially professionally—in ways that will affect positively the learning and teaching at SSE and some other Swedish institutions. At CU, institutional support from units such as the Personnel Office and especially the Office of Academic Links certainly helped to make possible my successful fellowship experience, and of course for this I am grateful. Similarly, Morningside College provided a home for my family, and in doing so their support surpassed that which is institutional and became personal. Therefore, I acknowledge a sincere debt to Professor Sir James Mirrlees and his Morningside team. Finally, the observations made in this report and any insight or experiential knowledge behind it, rest almost entirely on learning made possible by the hospitality and generous collegiality afforded me by Professor Haynes and his department. My gratitude to this dedicated group of teacher-scholars, too many to name here, goes beyond words.