

Report STINT Teaching Sabbatical
National University of Singapore

Terese Glatz, VT2022



Introduction

In December 2019, I got the decision that I was one of the candidates for the STINT Teaching Sabbatical Stipend. The plan then was for me and my family to go to Hong Kong and I would teach the fall semester of 2020 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Our plans, however, got changed because of the demonstrations going on in Hong Kong at the time that caused some worries and because of the upcoming pandemic. In the end of 2020, we found out that we could go to Singapore instead of Hong Kong, and we started to plan for this. After many backs and forth, we finally could travel to Singapore in December 2021 – two years after receiving my decision!

I spent the spring semester of 2022 in the Psychology department at National University of Singapore (NUS). I am very grateful to, finally, having the possibility to do this Teaching Sabbatical. My thanks go to STINT that have been very flexible and generous in their approach of our situation and to all my colleagues at NUS who made my stay worth the wait!



Terese Glatz

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Preparations

As soon as I found out that we were going to Singapore in December 2020, me and my family started to plan for our trip that, originally, were planned to start in July the same year. Because of Covid-19, however, our trip got postponed twice, and, finally, on December 13th, we manage to travel to Singapore!

For the abovementioned reasons, my preparation for the sabbatical has not been the typical one. Some preparations went quite smoothly. For example, NUS helped us completely with the living arrangements. We had the opportunity to get an apartment in Kent Vale, which is where all international faculty of NUS lives. This is a wonderful community very close to the university that has everything that you can ask for and that allows your stay to be very pleasant. As we were travelling with two young children (2 years and 5 years at the time of the sabbatical), we wanted to live in a safe area. Kent Vale is really the perfect place for families with children, as the facilities includes pools, play areas, and green areas to play in. We really enjoyed our time in Kent Vale!

Other preparations were more challenging and demanded more time and energy. These challenges were mostly due to the pandemic, and all the restrictions and regulations at place. The paperwork beforehand and finding out about what we needed to do to be able to enter Singapore was, at times, overwhelming. Although we started the whole process long time before our entry date, we still had to postpone the flight with another 10 days, as we did not receive our visas on time. This was of course stressful, but NUS was very helpful in all steps of the way, which I'm very grateful about!

In my preparation, I also communicated with my academic contact person at NUS, Doctor Lee Li Neng at the Psychology department. Together with the head of the department, we decided that I would be teaching together with two other lecturers in their modules. The idea was to get insight and experience from two very different modules, and I believe this was a winning concept in the end. What should also be mentioned in this context is that my position at Örebro university in Sweden was, at the time of my teaching sabbatical, structured in a unique way, as I had a temporary assignment as pedagogical developer in addition to my traditional position as a lecturer. This assignment meant that my time was divided between teaching and pedagogical development at the unit and Örebro university. For this reason, my preparation and actual visit in Singapore were also strongly influenced by my willing to get experiences regarding my role as a teacher, but also to get an insight and inspiration on aspects that deals with the pedagogical work in general and different ways of structuring the pedagogical context at our unit.

The host country and university

Singapore is a country in Southeast Asia with a population of five million. This is indeed a unique country and city, with a great multicultural diversity that offer a wide range of options. With English as one of four official languages (in addition to Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil), there are no problems being integrated into the society. The city offers many exciting and quite unique activities, and we found that many of these activities were fitted nicely to families with children.

National University of Singapore (NUS) is one of six public universities in Singapore and it was founded in 1905. In 2022, the QS World University Rankings ranked NUS 11th in the world and first in Asia Together with Nanyang Technological University, the largest university in Singapore. Hence, this is a top-class university with great reputation! It offers programs in a wide range of disciplines, and it has a semester-based modular system, which means that all courses run over the whole semester. The whole university has about 32.000 students, 2600 faculty, and about 4100 researchers and teachers.

The Psychology department is found in the College of Humanities and Sciences (CHS). This department was founded in 1986 but became an independent department in 2005. All in all, the department has about 44 researchers and teachers.

Activities during my teaching sabbatical

My time at NUS, I spent teaching a Developmental psychology module and a Lab module on adolescent psychology. In addition, I spent much time attending workshops and seminars as well as meeting with colleagues who were involved in pedagogical development in one way or another.

Module 1: Developmental psychology

This module was given on a basic level and were at the time of my visit only given digitally. The module can be described as a traditional developmental psychology course – and similar to ones I've been teaching in Sweden. It covered the whole span from infancy to adolescence. I co-taught with a colleague, Lili Quin, whom I meet at a conference during my PhD studies and have kept contact with since then. This collaboration was very fruitful and I'm very happy to have had the opportunity to teach together with Lili. We split the module based on our expertise and I had the main responsibility to cover areas of late school-age and adolescence. The module included both lectures and tutorials (i.e., seminars), all which were given live on zoom.

My teaching in this module included preparation and giving lectures on aspects in developmental psychology, and to prepare for the tutorials on my given topics. To help, each lecturer at NUS has teaching assistants (TA's). Lili and I had four TA's to work with. These TA's had the responsibility to do the tutorials, but me and Lili were responsible of developing the material for the tutorials and supervising the TA's in their implementation of these tutorials.

Unfortunately, one of the TA's got sick and for me this meant that I had to step in and take one of the tutorials that I had developed, but that would be offered by the TA. This ended up being a very good experience for me, as this allowed me to interact more closely with the students. This was, indeed, very nice as all the teaching was digital and we all know that interactions on zoom with a large group (in this case 300 students) is not really the most beneficial for interactions.

Hence, in the end I had the opportunity to give lectures in an area of my expertise, develop and supervise TA's in their implementation of the tutorials, meeting the students in one of these tutorials, and together with Lili develop the examinations and assignments for the students during the semester.

Module 2: Lab in adolescent psychology

This module was very different from the developmental psychology module described above. 15 students were enrolled in this module and, as all courses at NUS, it ran over the entire semester. The main goal of this module was for students, in smaller groups, to design and implement a research study. This involved developing research questions or hypotheses, collecting and analyzing data, writing a report, and presenting the results for the class in the end of the semester. I co-taught this module with Dr. Neng who had taught this module a couple of times before. Me and Neng developed some parts of the module together based on aspects that he had identified on former semesters.

The module included five lectures / workshops, which all had the goal of introducing students to the area of adolescent psychology and to methodology in psychological research. I had a specific responsibility of helping the students to deal with statistics and analyses of their data. On each lecture, either Neng or me had a lecture and then the students were to work with each other in their respective groups. The group work aimed at helping the students to find a good working environment and collaboration and were not necessarily connected to their respective project work (see photo below on one of these group assignments).



The last part of the lecture we spent on supervising the students on their group project. This supervision followed the development of their projects and dealt with the specific questions they were facing in that specific time. For example, the first lecture was used to brainstorm with the students about the topic they wanted to work with, and the second lecture was a discussion about potential ways of testing the question that they had decided on.

In this module, then, I was teaching adolescents psychology and method/statistics, as well as supervising students in the collaborative work and in their specific topics of their project work.

Activities related to pedagogical development

As I mentioned earlier, as part of my position in Sweden, I work with pedagogical development at the psychology unit. Therefore, I had a specific interest in getting insight into the structure around pedagogical work and how NUS worked with questions related to pedagogical development. At NUS, there is a specific center that works with pedagogical development: Center for Development of Teaching & Learning (CDTL). This center works closely with the departments and arrange activities for all faculty regarding pedagogy. They had formal activities, such as courses for new or senior faculty members, and other activities that were more informal, such as seminar series or workshops open for all faculty. I attended several of these open activities and also met with the director of the center to get a better understanding of their platform.

Two activities that I attended several times were CDTL's Café sharing session and Educator Track Career Development sessions. Café sharing session was a bottom-up activity that allowed faculty members to share their experiences with each other. Members who were interested in sharing ideas or experiences with other could do so in a very relaxed context. These sharing sessions were one hour long and included a presentation and a Q&A-section. The topics ranged from introduction and experiences from developing a new module to ideas on how to use student evaluations. The Educator Track Career Development sessions were a series of seminars that were given to faculty on topics of potential relevance (e.g., how to be a reflective educator). These seminars were more top-down, as they were organized by the center and did not focus on sharing experiences among the members as was the main goal of the Café sharing sessions. Often, the presenter was a person outside of the university who had been invited to present on the topic.

Reflections and lessons learned

It is always difficult to summarize the take-home or lessons that one learns, as these are often many and sometimes need to be digested over a longer period of time. However, I will describe three aspects that I found interesting with my experiences at NUS, and that I will keep exploring in Sweden.

Group work to facilitate learning and efficiency.

One thing that I quickly noticed in my teaching at NUS was the focus on students' work in groups. In both the modules I was teaching in, and especially the lab in adolescent psychology, included information and activities to facilitate the group dynamic and work. In the lab module, Dr. Neng had developed parts of each lecture to focus on theories and research on group dynamics and effectiveness in groups as well as actual activities for the students to do in their groups. The overall question at play here seems to be: How can one work with groups to maximize individual's learning and make the group more effective around their assignments?

In each of the lectures, students first got an introduction about what aspects are important to make a group most efficient. Then they got an assignment to do in the group. This assignment could be a collaborative assignment like the one on the first photo below. This was on the first lecture and the students were given uncooked spaghetti, tejp, some string, a marshmallow, and a scissor, and their assignment was to build the highest possible tower they could. This was a first assignment to get together as a group and find a solution to a difficult task. This task has been used in research on children and adults. The results from studies have shown that young children are better at this task, as they are generally more creative in their thinking and do not decide on one solution, but rather try different solutions. This assignment was used to get the students to brainstorm about different ideas before they decided on one solution. After finishing this task, they got to use the same method in discussing their group projects. We wanted them to be as broad as possible in their brainstorming about a potential research question for their group project. We did not want them to get stuck in one idea, but to try out different ideas and in the end decide on one of them. I think this is a very good way of helping students to become more flexible in their thinking and not to go with the first idea that they come up with.



One group is working on a collaborative assignment.

The photo below shows students collaborating on an assignment in which they were to identify each individual person's weaknesses and strengths and how this could be used in the best way in the group. This was done on the third lecture. Each student was first to do an individual assignment in which they identified their own strengths and weaknesses (with a starting point in a list and material handed to them). Then they identified differences and similarities within the group – and based on this, they were to discuss some ideas about how they could organize their work so that everyone could benefit, and that each person's strengths could be used in the best way.



I was really amazed by the focus on the group dynamic that I saw in this module. Not only did we offer very thorough and constructive supervision on their project work, but we also helped them how to work efficiently in a group. I have not seen this in Sweden or when I was teaching in the USA, and I think that this is something I would like to develop in my own courses. This becomes even more interesting knowing that Singapore is a country with a more collectivistic culture than Sweden. Hence, although students in Singapore might get more socialization regarding living and working with other people than students in Sweden – which would fall more towards the individualistic side of the spectra – this class included more aspects of the group than I've seen before. It is logical, though, to focus not only on the product that students together will accomplish, but also the process there, as most students do not have knowledge about group processes and dynamics. And how could they? Hence, we should not take for granted that they know how to work in a group, but we should probably give them the tools to be able to do so. I think this would benefit both the group to produce a better product in the end, but also individual student's learning and development.

Reflection as a student activity and examination?

Connected to the focus on the group as described above, the lab module also included a course work in which each student was to write reflections on their experiences and thoughts during the semester. Each week, students wrote and uploaded a text on that week's experiences. Students only got the instruction that they were to reflect on what they have been doing that week and about their learning. These reflections were uploaded and me and Dr. Neng read them each week. They were given credits for doing the reflections, but not on the content of the reflections.

These reflections differed a lot in lengths, depths, and focus. Some students focused exclusively on the project, describing their work with theories and discussions about the method. Other students focused more on the group exercises and the processes in the group. Many students seem to enjoy and appreciate the group exercises and reflected how this made the group members get to know each other. Some students also focused on their own thoughts and development/processes. It seemed like the reflections were a way for students to digest different things that they need to and that it filled different goals for different students.

I see so many good reasons for having this kind of course assignment. From a student-perspective, I think it gives student a platform to structure their own thoughts and learning process. I believe this is helpful and can help students to identify aspects they need to work more on, but also illustrate their learning process over time. From a teacher perspective, it was a good tool to get knowledge about what they were doing on times when we didn't meet them and to see what they found difficult and what they have learnt from. I found it extremely interesting to follow student's reflections over time!

One thing I noticed in the reflections was that most students were quite concerned about doing their part in the group projects. They were comfortable in addressing their individual shortcomings and they often reflected on how they could pitch in with other things in the group work – or how they needed to learn more about this certain aspect to help the group moving forward. I thought that was very interesting. I wonder if this is because of the culture – they learn from growing up in a collectivistic culture that they need to be doing their part in the group – or because the module included so many aspects of collaborations and finding a structure on the work in the groups. I also found myself wondering if the same reflections would occur in Sweden.

How can we develop the structure around collegiality at the unit?

The last thing that I want to bring up is the pedagogical platform that is very developed at NUS, both at the university level and at the psychology department. As I have been interested in pedagogical questions at a higher level, it was very interesting to get inspired by their work around these issues. One thing that I noticed was their work around collegiality and making use of each other in the education.

First, their platform of sharing experiences and knowledge with each other was very developed. As I mentioned above, on the university level, they had organized sharing sessions, in which faculty could get inspired by other colleague's pedagogical work. I

think this is something that my home university could learn from. Second, at the psychology department, faculty used their colleagues in different ways. On a more structured level, the department used "critical friends" as a way of giving feedback on pedagogical activities in the classroom. In this structure, one colleague would sit in on another faculty's lecture and give his or her feedback on the activity afterwards. This was an ongoing work and did not happen only once. Further, and on a more unstructured level, many of the colleagues helped each other in dealing with student evaluations or development of modules. I find this culture to be very inspiring. At the same time, however, the competition seemed much higher and so did the demands for excellence than at my home university. Hence, it seemed like NUS has found one way of sharing experiences and ideas for pedagogical methods that could, in the end, benefit the department and its specific faculty members.

Another thing that I saw differed from my experiences in Sweden was the structure of the courses in pedagogic offered to the faculty at NUS. In Sweden, all faculty should participate in the university-offered pedagogical courses – which often run over one semester. At NUS, they offer the Professional Development Programme-Teaching (PDP-T) to early-career academics, typically with fewer than three years of full-time teaching experience. It has two components: The PDP-T Core and the PDP-T Seminar Series. The core component consists of three full days that aims at helping the faculty member to become familiar with the teaching and learning process. The seminar series is designed to engage a deeper learning regarding teaching in higher education. This seminar series involves a community that meets for a session every couple of months over a course of a full year. The idea is to integrate and develop the concepts and ideas that were introduced in the core component into the own teaching practices. I believe that the length of this module can help with the development of depth and understanding of core concepts of teaching and learning, but it will also help the faculty member to develop a social network that could continue to be beneficial over a longer period than the specific year. To feel that one is not alone in the teacher role is not only good for the individual, but for the whole department.

What I will continue to explore back at my home university.

- **Group dynamic and work.** I will continue to explore the idea that we might have to help our students more with their group work. This can be done by giving students assignments that help them get together as a group and start thinking about how their individual characteristics and competencies can be used in the best way in the group.
- **Reflection assignments.** I think this would be very helpful for students to start thinking about the learning process and identify areas that are difficult. I also believe this could be helpful for teachers in identifying challenges in the class and follow individual student's development.
- **Platform for collegiality.** I think we can do better at helping each other in our pedagogical development. I believe we should work with a bottom-up structure, in which faculty members share their experiences and help each other evaluate our teaching. I also believe we can develop a mentorship program, in which we help new faculty members to get into the role of a teacher – both at the university level and at the department level.