

Teaching Sabbatical | Final Report
STINT



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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank STINT and Örebro University for their generous support in making this teaching sabbatical possible during the fall 2023 semester.

Introduction

I'm a senior lecturer in psychology and director of the psychology program at Örebro university. I did my teaching sabbatical during the fall semester 2023 at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. NTU is one of the oldest universities in Singapore, founded in 1981 but with a prehistory stretching back to the 1950s. NTU was originally conceived as a Polytech, but has diversified its academic interests over the years and now covers a wide range of departments, including psychology.

NTU currently has about 34 000 students enrolled and about 8 000 faculty and staff. In the past two decades or so it has risen to be among the world's best universities, ranking 4 in Asia and 1st of universities 50 years or younger.

The university campus is located close to wildlife and military facilities in the western part of the island that constitutes the country and city of Singapore. In the past, the university campus was nothing more than a swamp but through large investments and efforts it has been transformed to a very beautiful site with a nature-like feel, that includes an artificial lake, a Chinese garden and several award-winning architectural feats.



The Hive



Yunnan Garden



School of Art and Design

Preparation and planning

Soon after I was accepted as a 2023 STINT fellow, the heads of the psychology department at NTU met with me over Zoom. This was to provide me with some general information about the structure of the fall semester, the student cohort at NTU, and what types of courses the department offers. With this information, I could reflect on what I wanted to do during my teaching sabbatical.

A couple of months after this initial meeting, Me and my partner did a planning trip to NTU. This took place in April and was time well spent! During this stay, the department heads and I planned my teaching for the fall in greater detail and I also got to meet my new colleagues. In addition, one of the faculty was assigned to me as a buddy. During my stay in the fall, my buddy showed me around in Singapore and provided me with information about the country and city.

During the planning trip, I also met with administration at the psychology department and representatives from the NTU International Office. The help and information I received from them was crucial. Most importantly, they initiated the visa process. (It is NTU that applies for the visa, but the STINT fellow must provide all the personal information). Because the visa process is a lengthy one, my advice to upcoming STINT fellows is to make sure that it is initiated as soon as possible.

The international office also connected me to the office for campus housing. All contacts with campus housing worked very well, and I was offered an apartment at Nanyang Hights. Housing in Singapore is very expensive and apartments are hard to come by, so I was advised by previous STINT fellows at NTU to accept whatever was offered by campus housing.

Both me and my partner were very happy with the apartment that we got. We were told that there would be construction work nearby, but that never bothered us. The apartment was large and in addition to two bedrooms and a living room it also included a kitchen, a large bathroom, and a laundry room. It was fully equipped with furniture and utensils. On a few occasions, we had questions about the apartment, and we always received assistance quickly. I personally very much appreciated living on the university campus since that meant I did not have to commute to work but could take a walk in the mornings. Both of us also appreciated the many beautiful feats of NTU campus, the campus club house with gym and pool, and the

many affordable canteens. In Singapore, it is customary to eat out rather than cooking at home, and we followed this custom during the stay. However, at the end of the stay, we got a bit weary with the food offered in the canteens. The campus is large but there is a free campus shuttle that also goes to Pioneer, the closest subway station. From there, it was a 40 mins ride by subway to the city.

Tasks and responsibilities

The psychology department at NTU is roughly the same size as my department in Örebro. It has about 18 faculty from various subdisciplines of psychology and about 500 students per semester in undergraduate programs. In addition to that, the psychology department also offers courses to students in many other departments.

During my planning trip to NTU, we decided on my teaching for the fall. This was an easy decision to make, since NTU offers a course called Biological Psychology (HP2200) that was very similar in scope to a course in neuropsychology that I have been teaching at Örebro university for some time. We decided that I would co-teach this course with Dr Yu, who had designed and taught it for a few years. This course had a lot of students enrolled, so it was also beneficial to NTU to include more teachers, if only for one semester.

The course Biological Psychology was offered to psychology students in their second year. Biological psychology studies how psychological processes are implemented by the brain and other organs. Basic psychology was a prerequisite for this course. However, there was some variation in how acquainted students were with the biological concepts introduced in the course: Some did not know of them beforehand whereas others did a double major in both psychology and biology and thus had very good knowledge also about biology.

The course ran throughout the entire semester and consisted of one lecture per week. Because this course was mandatory and on a basic level, there were a lot of students enrolled: about 200 students. For that reason, we decided to split the course into two separate cohorts and to do all teaching twice, one time for each cohort.

Students' knowledge was assessed continuously throughout the course with multiple-choice tests. In addition, students took part in one group presentation each where they summarized an

empirical study in biological psychology, and wrote one individual paper each where they provided an outline to a study in biological psychology.



School of Social Science with the Psychology department

Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

Dr Yu had designed the course and was course coordinator. He was very welcoming and invited me to take part in all preparations ahead of the start of the semester. We did this during my planning trip and by email during the summer. Upon my arrival at NTU, I was assigned to my own office in the psychology department and everything else I needed, such as an NTU computer and access to the learning platform. Thus, all practical details were taken care of and prepared in an excellent way.

Dr Yu and I decided to split lectures and assessments between us, so that we did half of them each. I thus did half of the lectures and each lecture was delivered twice, one time to each cohort. Because biological psychology is such a vast topic, I had not taught some of the topics previously. It thus took me some time to prepare the lectures. All lectures were recorded and made available to students who had valid absence (e.g., medical appointments).

I also constructed and corrected half of the multiple-choice tests. They were administrated in class through the digital learning platform. The system for doing this was somewhat complicated and I was grateful for the kind assistance by Dr Yu. Students who had valid absence from the multiple-choice test were allowed to do a written make-up assignment. Dr Yu and I also split the correction of the individual papers between us (and got help from teaching assistants). Because of the great number of students enrolled in the course (about 200) this was tedious, but interesting, work at the end of the semester.

In addition to this, I also attended social events at the department of psychology, such as networking, met with colleagues and took part of other colleagues' teachings.

Important lessons

One of my motivations to do a teaching sabbatical in Asia was to get a cultural perspective on education. Such a cultural perspective is important as the world of education is becoming increasingly more integrated. Specifically, I wanted to gain a cultural perspective on how student-centered learning and deep learning are viewed and implemented in Asian education. The educational psychologist John Biggs claims that Confucian cultures do not prioritize student-centered approaches to learning (<https://www.johnbiggs.com.au/academic/the-paradox-of-the-chinese-learner/>). My experiences during my teaching sabbatical align with this.

Students in my classes at NTU were shy and difficult to engage. In Örebro, I'm used to having an ongoing dialogue with students during my lectures in that I ask them questions, challenge them to think, and that students ask me questions and challenge me to think about what I'm lecturing about. This usually works well also with large groups. However, I found that students in my classes at NTU were unwilling to respond to my attempts at having such a dialogue. Whenever I asked a question, there would be silence.

I usually include organized activities in my lectures to provide students opportunities to practice for themselves. However, in my classes at NTU, students did not seem to be very engaged when I assigned them to such tasks; It seemed that they did not use the time to actually do work on the task at hand. I tried to be more explicit with my pedagogical ideas and to inform students why I include such activities. It seemed to help, but only to some extent.

I learned from colleagues at NTU that students' low engagement during class was a known challenge. A survey done at NTU in 2010 had identified this as a problem that needed to be dealt with. Among other things, a building called "the Hive" was constructed following this survey. The Hive was built in such a way as to better facilitate student-centered learning.

My conclusion is that students at NTU seem to have somewhat different expectations on teaching and lecturing than my students in Örebro. It seemed to me that they viewed me as an authority, and that they expected me to provide them with knowledge they could learn by

heart. Obviously, such expectations are also apparent in students in Örebro, but they were more pronounced at NTU. I suspect that this can in part be attributed to differences between Confucian and Western cultures. However, I suspect that the format of the lectures and the design of the lecture halls, where all students are facing me, contributed to students' expectations. If I had continued teaching at NTU, I would try to modulate students' expectations by making changes to this format. I would prefer to use lecture halls where students are allowed to be more mobile so that we can easily switch to student-centered activities. Also, I would prefer to also use other types of learning activities than lectures, such as seminars and workshops.

In addition to low engagement during class, there was also low attendance. One reason for this could be that during the pandemic, NTU had switched to all digital teaching, and in the first few semesters after the pandemic, all lectures were still being recorded and made available to all students. I was told that that had reduced attendance quite severely. For this semester, NTU had decided that although lectures were to be recorded, they would only be made available to those students who had valid reasons for absence, such as medical appointments. So, the attendance was much higher than it had been for the past few semesters. Still, it was low compared to what I am used to in Örebro. From what I was told by colleagues, this is the norm at NTU. I speculate that this is because students take several courses in parallel so that some of them may prioritize only reading the textbook in some courses and skip those classes. At Örebro University, we have seen such effects after trying out doing courses in parallel. Also, the policy was quite liberal at NTU in allowing access to video recording to students and it is possible that those recordings were shared among students without us knowing about it.

Comparison between the host and the home institutions (in Sweden)

Teaching psychology at NTU and ORU is similar in many ways. The content of the course I taught at NTU was similar and on the same level as my course in neuropsychology at ORU, although the emphasis sometimes differed. NTU also uses the same brand of digital learning platform as ORU, although Dr Yu used more of its functions than I had in the past.

I'm a bit skeptical about using multiple-choice questions to assess students' learning, mostly because I think that those questions tend to only test factual knowledge. At Örebro University, we tend to emphasize student's abilities to use knowledge and to think critically about it, and

that is harder to test with multiple-choice questions. Although it can be done, it is very time consuming to construct such questions. Still, I've seen a trend also in Örebro to use multiple-choice assessments more frequently, mostly because we have had an increase in class sizes.

The main difference regards the size of student cohorts. In my neuropsychology course at ORU, I have fewer students with more similar background knowledge in biology. Also, their level of motivation is pretty uniform. At NTU, there was more heterogeneity in background knowledge and motivation.

It seems that NTU was liberal with offering digital teaching after the pandemic. In contrast, Örebro university was clear with students that they were expected to be back on campus as soon as the pandemic had passed. We did have a few discussions about this with students but pretty soon all students accepted going back to normal. However, NTU had continued using digital teaching also after the pandemic, for example by recording all lectures. This worked very well for me as a teacher, since IT did all of this automatically. However, it seems offering students to take part in digital recordings make for lower in-class attendance. We also allowed students to do their group presentation as a pre-recorded video presentation. This probably alleviate some performance anxiety. However, giving presentations in front of a live audience is something all of them will have to do sooner or later in their careers so this could also be opportunities to practice,

Recommendations

I highly recommend doing a planning trip. Such a trip will allow you to get better acquainted with the people you will be working with and to plan your teaching sabbatical. Regarding the content of your teaching sabbatical, I recommend that you keep in mind what you want to get out of your stay. For some, the best experience may be to take part in several different types of activities in different courses. For me, it was very valuable to be involved in a course that is similar to the one I am teaching back home, and take part in all of that course's activities. Remember that you are not free labor for the university! Rather, make sure that you will have time available for reflections and pedagogical development.

Co-teaching was also important to me. Dr Yu was my primary social contact at NTU, I learned a lot about teaching, and teaching in Singapore, from him, not the least about expectations and how to think about students. The fact that I was assigned a buddy was also

great. My buddy had received awards for his teaching and he provided me with a lot of tips on how to deal with students. Through these two contacts, I had many rewarding conversations about pedagogics.

Because the visa process is a lengthy one, my advice to upcoming STINT fellows is that you make sure that it is initiated as soon as possible after you are accepted to the program. I got a lot of help from the international office, so you may contact them if you want this process to be initiated as soon as possible.

Other than that, Singapore is a very well-organized city state, so you will have no problems acclimating to a life there. The government wants to take good care of its citizens with an affluence of directions and rules. In many ways, Singapore is similar Swedish society.

Action plan: Topics to address and, if possible, introduce in Sweden

- For my own courses, I want to explore using the digital learning platform in new ways, as I learned during my teaching sabbatical at NTU. For example, it can be used to conduct exams in combination with lectures and to deal with submissions in an efficient manner. Also, I really like the group work about empirical studies and the written task where students designed their own studies, and I will contemplate introducing those tasks also in my own course in Örebro.
- NTU has a strong focus on internationalization, as do we in Örebro. At the psychology program in Örebro, students are allowed to do an international semester in their 4th semester. It has been hard to find suitable universities that fit our education, but I think NTU may be a match. This is something I want to explore.
- I very much appreciate learning about pedagogics and research from my colleagues at NTU and intend to stay in touch with them.