

Final Report

Teaching Sabbatical UCLA 2022 (2020)

Ylva Söderfeldt

I spent the Spring Quarter – March to June – 2022 teaching a course in medical history at UCLA’s History department. Although I was already aware when making the initial plans for the course that its theme – medicine and democracy – would resonate with current events around the coronavirus pandemic, the contents became even more salient than I could have ever imagined. Not only were virus-related restrictions and measures a constant part of the everyday life on and off campus while I was teaching students about the emergence of the public health paradigm, the news of the impending reversal of Roe v. Wade came in the same week as our session about reproductive rights and the women’s health movement. Teaching about medicine and democracy in Los Angeles in Spring 2022 was therefore as much a learning as it was a teaching experience.



Vending machine for obligatory weekly COVID-19 test on campus



Anti-abortion procession on the day of the Supreme Court leak

Preparation and planning

I was selected for a Teaching Sabbatical at the University of California, Los Angeles, History department, originally planned for the Fall of 2020. My intention for the teaching sabbatical (henceforth: TS) was to gain perspectives, skills, and inspiration specifically for the teaching in medical humanities. The medical humanities is an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of biomedicine and health on the one hand, and the humanities, arts, and social sciences on the other. I come to this field being a historian of medicine having worked in medical education in Sweden and Germany since 2012. After joining Uppsala University, I have become deeply involved in building a medical humanities profile here which includes a growing teaching offer at the medical school. Here, I have enjoyed great freedom in designing a curriculum and coordinating its different parts, not least since a new and reformed medical school program was launched in 2021. With this project in mind, I have felt the need to focus attention towards my pedagogical development. The pace of launching and expanding the medical humanities teaching offer has been fast, and even though it has been very well-received I have come to a point where there is a clear need to take a step back and reflect on how and what we teach. Hence the TS was an opportunity for me to devote a few months exclusively to teaching while gathering new impressions and experiences that might help in my role as a coordinator and developer of a novel teaching offer.

As it was to turn out, the coronavirus pandemic changed the timeline so that the TS could not happen until the new medical school curriculum had already been launched. The preparatory period was therefore, like for most of the TS-2020 cohort, both very long and very short. My preparations began in 2020 with conversations with my hosts at the UCLA History department, professors Soraya de Chadarevian and Ted Porter. They asked me to provide a few ideas for potential courses, and we settled on one concept for an upper division seminar. I also began some of the practical work filling in the visa application and looking around for housing, but in late Spring on 2020 it became clear that the trip would not be feasible. The planning was put on ice, first with the intention of going the following Spring, then the Fall of 2021. None of these timelines of course worked out, but both my hosts and my home department were extremely patient with the repeated rescheduling.

When the coronavirus-related travel restrictions were lifted in the Fall of 2021, the planning entered a new phase, although it for a long time remained unclear if a trip would indeed be possible. This was a stressful time period of making plans quickly, while still maintaining a plan B in case the visit would have to be rescheduled again. The visa offices of both UCLA

and the US Embassy were struggling with extreme backlogs, and it seemed very uncertain if we would get the right paperwork on time. That in turn meant that when the visa was finally issued, we had little more than a month to set up our trip including housing, schools, travel, subletting our apartment, and arranging for our absence at work (my husband and two children accompanied me to Los Angeles). In addition, during this time I had to do the more detailed planning of the syllabus, set up the course page, order the required books etc. The staff of the History department assisted me in these preparations. They were able to set up my university account, published the course in the online catalog, and provided sample syllabi for me to use when developing my own. This was very helpful, as there were few guidelines and a huge amount of freedom in designing the course. I was allowed to select a time slot for my weekly teaching session, and received assistance in ordering the course literature.

To be able to take our two children (ages 10 and 12) with us to the US, we had to apply with the city (Uppsala Kommun) to “otherwise fulfill the obligatory schooling requirement” (“ansökan om att fullgöra skoolplikten på annat sätt”). In the application, we explained our reasons for going abroad and the school situation in California. This application had to be approved by the local school board. Initially, we were worried that we might not get an approval, but this turned out not to be a problem although we had to reapply repeatedly as the trip was rescheduled.

Tasks and responsibilities

My main responsibility was teaching the course “Medicine and democracy”. This was a 187 seminar, meaning that it had one three-hour session per week during the Spring quarter (10 weeks), and is aimed towards teaching historiography (the writing of history). I was solely in charge of this course including all aspects of its planning, teaching, and grading. When designing the course, I chose to not copy anything that I have previously taught but to design a completely new syllabus closely related to my research interests. Out of the ten sessions, seven were straightforward text seminars with classroom discussion of assigned readings, each week with a different theme. In addition, I had one introductory session and two sessions that were focused on the final papers. Those were at the middle and end of the course, and allowed students to present their work-in-progress and give and receive feedback.

In addition to this, I was asked to give a presentation at the History of Science colloquium during my stay. I received an office space which I shared with another visiting lecturer, and

was invited to take part in all activities at the department. Due to the pandemic, there were less on-site activities than usual, but I did attend faculty meetings and social gatherings, as well as events around an ongoing hiring process at the department. This was an interesting insight into the day to day of an American higher education institution. In particular, it was interesting to attend the job talks at which candidates publicly lectured and answered questions.

Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

My seminar was held after lunch each Wednesday. This meant a regular schedule of preparing for the session in the first half of the week, and after each session grading the weekly papers that the students submitted. I also had office hours the same day as the seminar, and sometimes met with students outside of those hours.

There was some fluctuation in the student group in the beginning of the quarter, which I was told to expect as students may “shop around” in the first weeks. At first, about 20 students enrolled in the course, but several of them never showed up. A few attended the first couple of sessions but then chose to drop out. After the initial “shopping” period however, the attendance was relatively stable and in the end I had about 10 students complete the course. The student group was diverse: only a minority were history majors, the rest being majors in other social science, humanities, and bioscience disciplines. They were in their third or fourth year.

Apart from the teaching, I made efforts to participate in different aspects of the university and department to gain a better understanding of the US and University of California (UC) systems. I sat in on lectures by colleagues at the host institution, both a smaller format closer to my own focus (history of science), and a very large-scale course with about 300 students on a topic further removed from my own (medieval history). I also participated in the History of Science colloquium, which got me in touch with a few graduate students, with whom I also met individually to discuss their work.

As my teaching in Sweden is primarily not in History but in the medical humanities, I initiated contact with the UCLA Center for Social Medicine and Humanities. Through that contact, I was able to connect with the MD-PhD program and attend the National Conference for Physician-Scholars in the Social Sciences and Medicine. This event was aimed at MD-PhD students in the humanities and social sciences, i.e. students from all over the US doing a dual curriculum in which they attend medical school parallel to earning their Ph.D. It was also

attended by faculty directing such programs. The conference was a fantastic opportunity to learn about this type of program and connect with researchers in the medical humanities. Especially since I am involved in starting a new research school in the medical humanities in Uppsala, this was a very valuable experience.

Important lessons

My most important lesson from the TS was that I should develop my teaching style to be more hands-on. In the course I used my typical approach which is to offer a large amount of freedom to the students. For example, I did not direct discussions very actively, nor give many criteria for the assignments. This is a teaching style I have been used to and is intended to give room to students to explore the topic of the teaching freely, and to use their own creativity for assignments. As an example, I asked each student to present in class and lead one classroom discussion, but told them that how they chose to do so was up to them. I have done this previously, and often seen very positive results. However, in this setting the students seemed very cautious and uncertain on how to interpret the task, which led them to mostly just read pre-formulated presentations and discussion questions aloud. The same went for the classroom discussions that I led myself – open questions seemed to inhibit the students and make them go quiet. After a few sessions, I therefore chose to use a more directed approach, in this case specifically the “fish bowl” seminar structure ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl_\(conversation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl_(conversation))). This got much more positive results.

Applying my typical approach in this new context made me reflect about how some more guidelines help to release creativity and expression, rather than inhibit it. The reason why this became more clear at UCLA than in my previous teaching I would guess has to do with the more hierarchical relationship between lecturer and students, and the greater emphasis on achievement and grades in the US education system. Those circumstances meant that students were more uncertain and less willing to take risks, as they are hyper-aware of the importance of meeting expectations and earning good grades. In addition, where I usually teach at medical school there is only a pass or fail grade, which also gives a more relaxed atmosphere. The freedom in course design was a good opportunity for me to try out a way to set up a course in a new way. I tried texts that I haven't previously used in teaching, and a different way to connect the topics of individual sessions than I have previously worked with. This also revealed to me more clearly than before a fundamental challenge in my teaching: the

reluctance or difficulty many students have in trying to truly understand a perspective different than their own (for instance a text from an earlier time period). Many students are extremely good at deconstructing, criticizing, and picking apart, but they tend to proceed to those skills ahead of time before they have made the effort to first understand. This challenge was made more clear than usual because of the intense connection between this course and current events as I touched on above. It was often hard to get the students to engage with the historical subject matter, rather than its relationship to the current political landscape, and to get them to reflect on the texts beyond deciding if they were “right” or “wrong”. I did not resolve this during my time at UCLA, but I did discuss it with colleagues who had similar experiences. One colleague described that she will engage students in close reading in the classroom. I am looking forward to working on ways to encounter this tendency in my future teaching.

At the same time, it was important to me to also provide room for the discussions about current events which came up in every session. First, the students were just recently back from online learning and an incredibly stressful time period during the pandemic. This, and the fact that that experience was perfectly aligned with the theme of the course made me see the seminars as an important space for them to reflect on their experiences of medicine and democracy. The other events, such as the Roe v. Wade leak that happened during the course, further increased the need for having such conversations in class.

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

The diversity of the student group was one of the main differences to Sweden. Whereas in my regular teaching, whether at medical school or in my home discipline of History of Science and Ideas, the pre-existing knowledge of the students is much clearer and more consistent. At UCLA, I had some students who had already taken closely related courses and came with a high level of background knowledge of the topics in the course, but I also had students with no previous experience studying history or even the humanities.

A related difference is that due to the structure of the education at the host institution, and American universities in general, the students did not previously know each other and knew that they would be spending very limited time together. Hence, they were not very motivated to be social with each other. This made a difference in the group dynamics. There appeared to me to be very little social interaction between the students in my class. For a seminar of this kind, a higher level of social interaction between the students – if only small chats during the

break – would have been desirable. The fact that most students wore masks also added to this lack of personal connection.

On a general level, the teaching is also much more diverse than in the Swedish system. The strict rules and standards regarding examination, grading, and learning objectives that I was used to were non-existent. Instead, each teacher has great freedom in designing and setting up the rules for their course. In addition, the teaching typically relates closer to the profile and interests of the individual teacher than fulfilling a particular requirement. This means that the range of themes and topics available to history students is wider, and also much more specific – where I in Sweden might teach a course on history of medicine, here I was teaching on one particular time period, aspect, and perspective on medical history.

The use of technology was very similar to Sweden. UCLA even uses the same computer system, Canvas, for course pages, grading and communication with students.

Recommendations

I feel extremely privileged to have gotten to spend a quarter teaching at UCLA, and would highly recommend the experience. Although the ongoing pandemic meant that the campus life was not as vibrant as it might otherwise have been, and the hallways often quite deserted, the experience with colleagues was a very warm and welcoming one. At the same time, I believe that it cannot be overstated that University of California system is a vast administrative apparatus, and that the technical aspects tend to be quite complex. It is hard to predict which parts of the administrative issues will take time or be difficult. For me, the visa-related issues went quite smoothly, but instead my library access became an incredibly complicated problem that required hours of work and the help of several administrators to resolve. For other visiting lecturers that I met, there were other technical systems that malfunctioned. Technical glitches such as these are, from what I could understand, common and hard to prevent from happening. Be prepared that there will be something that does not work, and that you will need to invest time to fix it.

I would also recommend erring on the side of a more detailed syllabus. Some of the examples I saw I found at first a bit over-complicated in the instructions they gave for assignments, for late submissions, and grading, but I did come to realize that this saves a lot of work later. I had a number of students question the grading, and it would have helped to have put up an even more clear standard beforehand.

I am glad that I reached out beyond my host department and was able to get in touch with researchers at other parts of the university. I definitely recommend other fellows to do so, and also to consider reaching out to other universities nearby. The response was consistently very friendly and welcoming.

Moving abroad as a family of four was both rewarding and challenging. We were glad to have chosen an apartment located near campus, even though that meant a lower level of comfort than some other offers we had. In the end, we were very glad to not have to commute. We also chose to have a car, even though we hadn't been sure from the start if this would be necessary. It really increased our quality of life to be able to move around Los Angeles and to make small weekend trips.

Our children attended public school and had a very good experience doing so. Since we speak English at home, the language was not a problem. Still, there was much in the school work that was new to them and they had to spend significantly more time on homework. They were able to walk independently to their respective schools, which was very helpful to our daily routine.

My stay as a STINT fellow would not have been possible if it weren't for the support of my husband. He took on the majority of the daily tasks at home as well as much of the extra administrative and practical things involved in setting up life as a family abroad, which made it possible for me to focus on my work.

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

My stay at UCLA inspired me to work more directly on some of my weaknesses as a teacher: my tendency to offer too few guidelines and instructions and the challenge of getting students to focus on understanding before critique. I will be using more directed classroom discussions from now on, and give more detailed instructions for assignments. For the focus on understanding, I am interested to explore reading exercises in class, similar to the ones suggested in this recent book: <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lup/publication/8ef42296-60c6-4a4e-a3ab-455cd63c6ad8>

I am also considering to begin offering office hours. Having an open timeslot when students can come to discuss the course was a fruitful way of connecting with them. Ideally, this would be introduced more broadly on the department level or across the Swedish higher education system. That would however require models for reimbursement of that time.

I would like to see more courses of the kind I was allowed to give at UCLA at Swedish universities. That is, courses that are perhaps narrow thematically, but therefore go deep into a

topic and allow a close relationship with ongoing research. The ambition to offer courses on, for example, “history” in a more general sense does to an extent deceive us into thinking that we have a broader perspective. In fact, however, it is worth considering if not a variety of more “niche” courses would actually give a deeper *and* more comprehensive education. However, the main problem in this is that such an approach would require a targeted hiring policy in order to make sure that a reasonable diversity of topics is represented among faculty members. Arguably, at least on the scale of most Swedish universities, this would conflict with hiring the most competitive researchers.

The mix of students was also an appealing aspect of the course, and it motivated me to try to find ways to achieve a similar diversity at my home institution. The way that the education system is set up makes this a bit complicated, but I have become interested in finding ways of bringing students from other programs and disciplines into some of the medical humanities sessions at the medical school.

As any stay abroad probably would, the TS fellowship reinforced my belief that we can always do more when it comes to offering orientation and information to new or visiting faculty members. As in most department I’ve seen from the inside, the colleagues and staff are very helpful but a file of basic information would be a crucial addition to help introducing a new teacher to the job. This regards how to do practical things such as enter grades into the system, how to set up the course page, all different deadlines and required forms and procedures. This is not a criticism of my host institution, as the lack of such documents is near-universal. Going forward, I would like to make sure that we can offer these resources at Uppsala. Coincidentally, I was also involved with putting together a more general guidebook for Swedish academia while I was on the TS (*Beginners guide to Swedish academia*, will be published soon by the Young Academy of Sweden).

One positive aspect of the many delays in my TS is that I have already stayed in touch with my hosts for more than two years. This contact continues after the fellowship. In addition, I was able to connect with more colleagues at other departments during my stay, and am still in touch with them as well and planning future collaborations.