

STINT TEACHING SABBATICAL 2019

Final report



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The Ohio State University

Department of History

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First of all, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to STINT for enrolling me in the Teaching Sabbatical Program and giving me and my family the wonderful opportunity to stay in Columbus, Ohio. It has been a wonderful experience for all of us. I would also like to thank my home institution Luleå University of Technology for nominating me as a candidate. Finally I would like to thank the History Department at Ohio State for their generosity and warm welcome, especially Chris, Bart, Birgitte, and Scott, but there are so many more who made our visit unforgettable.

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Ohio State University (usually Ohio State or OSU) is a public university founded in 1870. The university was originally known as the Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College and was a land-grant university, meaning that the university was given federal land as its economic foundation, land which could be sold and used for raising funds. Today Ohio State is regarded as one of the best public universities in the US and since 2001 listed as one of the Public Ivies. Ohio State has been ranked 42nd nationally (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2016) and 90th in the world (Times Higher Educational World Universities Ranking, 2016). Ohio State has about 61 000 students enrolled on its main campus in Columbus, Ohio and additionally around 7 000 students at the five smaller campuses scattered around Ohio. OSU is well known for its athletic teams called the Buckeyes, after the state tree (Ohio buckeye – sv. en slags hästkastanje). The most renowned team is the male football team that place its home games at the gigantic Ohio stadium, or the horse shoe, with a staggering seating of around 105 000. A colleague at the history department saying that Ohio State is a football team with a university attached.

The history department at Ohio State was established in 1879 and is today the largest history departments in the US with more than 65 senior faculty teaching and supervising about 12 000 undergraduate and 500 grad students in several hundred courses and programs. Due to its mere size the department has several clusters of almost 20 different fields of study within history, like Medieval; Women's, Gender, and Sexuality; Islamic; Military; Native American; and Environmental, Health, Technology, and Science (EHTS). EHTS being the group I belonged to during my stay, consisting roughly of about 15 Faculty and 10 PhD students.

PREPARATION AND PLANNING

Shortly after I was nominated as one of the candidates to the second round of selection, I was approached by a representative from the History Department at Ohio State. That was already in Mid-October. He told me that the department were interested in hosting me and I was also informed about the Environmental, Health, Technology, and Science History (EHTS)

group and the courses they offered. After I was selected in December the contacts intensified and I was formally introduced to my academic contact person, Chris Otter, and my administrative contact person, Steve McCann.

In January 2019 Chris and I, together with the Head of the department Scott Levi, decided which course I would teach. The course was HISTORY 4705 - RESEARCH SEMINAR IN HISTORY OF TECHNOLOGY, 3 Cr. Hrs. As I am working in Sweden I was thinking that this meant I was going to teach "somebody else's course" and wanted Ohio State to send over the current literature list, syllabus, and other documents in order for me to start ordering papers and books so I could read all the material and prepare for the course. After receiving the documentation asked for, I understood by the mail conversation that I had missed out on something and when asking I was told that I could teach the course anyway I wanted, totally free to do whatever I liked. That was something new!

Already in the beginning of February I was told to submit a "short description" of the course. The text would be used in the catalogue so students would have the possibility to read more about the course content and select it. The course was capped for 16 students only and if selected it was, together with the other 4000-level courses, the first and only course on advanced level for students majoring in history. I also learnt that the course had classes scheduled every Monday from 2:15 – 5:00, and I could not change that, no matter what.

I decided to follow the previous structure of the course to some degree, but filled it with my own content. The course was previously divided into three sections and consisted of writing a research paper (50%), seminars (25%), and writing an op-ed (25%). I decided to change it to writing a research paper (50%), seminars (30%), and presentation of research paper (20%). I wrote a brief description of the content and presented a tentative literature list and sent it to the student administration at the History department February 8, two days after the STINT-meeting in Stockholm.

Parallel with the work on the course content I worked with Chris Otter to agree upon a time for my planning trip. We decided that April 7 – 14 would be a good time to visit. Most of the colleagues from EHTS would be in Columbus at that point due to the annual ASEH conference, American Society for Environmental History, which they hosted. To attend the conference would give me the possibility to catch up on my future colleagues' research, and also providing me with the opportunity to get to know them better personally, as there are always a lot of social events going on at conferences. The conference started on Wednesday evening and I had therefore three full days to schedule meetings with people at the department, as the chaired-Professor Scott Levi, Chris Otter and a few other colleagues. I also had a seminar where I presented a research paper I was working on. The planning trip went very well as I got to know several colleagues, discuss the course I was going to teach, teaching in general, research, and things about living in Columbus. Regarding Columbus I learnt that I had three areas that was suitable for a family to live in, either Bexley, Dublin, or Upper Arlington.

Already from the beginning it was decided that my family would accompany me to Columbus. My wife Leni, my two boys Patrick (15) and Andreas (11), and my dog Plutten were all very excited, just like me, for the possibility to participate in this adventure. The planning for the trip was both fun and vitalizing, but also difficult to some degree. As the boys were going to school in Columbus we needed to find suitable living in an area with good schools. We knew about good areas (above) but it was difficult to find a house there within our budget. Just a week before we departed everything was sorted out through a friend of a friend. All the paperwork was dealt with in due time and in July we departed for Los Angeles and a short vacation before we commenced on a week-long road trip in a camper (RV) to Columbus, Ohio.



Our house and car in Bexley, Ohio

TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

During my stay at the History department at Ohio State I worked with and was responsible for the course described above, HISTORY 4705 - RESEARCH SEMINAR IN HISTORY OF TECHNOLOGY. I had ten students enrolled and I really liked working with them. They were always well prepared and willing to participate in discussions. As mentioned earlier the course was divided into three sections. The largest part (50%) was writing a research paper.

The topic being a personal history of technology. The students would choose a technology and study how it has changed over a few generations regarding usage, design and so forth. They needed to interview older relatives and friends, and analyze written sources in order to study general trends and how it affected micro level users. I also had lectures about source criticism and how to write research papers. We had several seminars when we discussed all the work handed in. I often use peer-assessment when I work with students on writing assignments. It worked very well this time too. They always had to read all the hand-ins and also discuss the content. At the end of the semester we had a day when the students presented their research paper, most choose to do it as a short lecture with power-points but a couple of them had made You-tube videos of their presentations, something I encouraged as I wanted them to try different media in their presentations. I also had individual supervision with all the students, reading and commenting on all the texts from the first drafts to the final papers. This was very time consuming but also rewarding.



My students

The third part of the course was literature seminars. I had selected a number of key texts, mostly papers but also a few books, from History of Technology spanning from the 1960's until today. We had seminars every other week, and the students seemed to like the various concepts and theories presented. We had the possibility to really scrutinize and discuss the texts in depth, something I rarely have the possibility to do in Sweden. However, I had a mid-term evaluation who showed that the students thought that the work-load was too heavy in

this course, especially the books, so I changed the literature list and instead of two full books they had to read a few chapters. This change was very welcome and appreciated, which also showed in the final evaluation at the end of the semester.

Before grading the students at the end of the semester I had several talks with colleagues about how they usually think about that. I had heard from former STINT Fellows at the STINT meeting in Stockholm in February, that it could be a pressure from students on the teachers to give them very high grades. This was not the case here and I was reassured that I could give any grade I wanted, which felt good. Ohio State being a public university with relatively low tuition made the student group generally consist of a wide range of under- to over-achievers, just like in Sweden even though almost all students in my group was good to very good.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE TEACHING SABBATICAL

Apart from teaching my own course I also took the chance to “shadow” several colleagues when they were teaching. As I only had a small group of students I was very curious about the larger groups and the survey courses in History with up to 150 students. It was very rewarding to see how good the teachers were to catch the students’ interest, interact with them, and having everything under control even in large lecture halls. Some had a very strict approach and in some classes the students weren’t allowed to use electronic devices, such as laptops, tablets, or phones. That worked very well as all the students knew about the rules beforehand, and only once did I hear the Professor reprimand a student for using his phone in class.

When shadowing my colleagues, I also learnt about the Teaching Assistant system (TA). To help the Professor and to reduce their work load, the department used paid graduate students or TA’s to grade papers, administrate hand-ins, and other administrative and academic tasks. Often it could be one TA in the class but sometimes there were two of them. This system was very appreciated by the Professors and also by the grad students involved, as it was a good teaching experience and also paid. In one class the Professor demanded the students to hand in written questions before every lecture. The questions were then organized by a TA and presented to the Professor in advance of every class. During class the Professor regularly named a student and answered the question asked. This was a great way of interacting with student’s and making them feel seen by the Professor. It created a friendly atmosphere in the class-room.

In another class in History of Technology the History teacher shared the class with two Professor from other departments (engineering) and two TA’s. The class was really big with around 150 students, but that did not seem to affect the lecturers in their relaxed style of

lecturing and working together. Good example of how to work together with Professors of different background. It also gave us good conversations about teaching afterwards.

As I have been heading the History unit at LTU for five years and have had other administrative tasks over the years, as being member of the Faculty Board, I have a strong interest in questions regarding leadership and administration within academia. It was therefore very interesting to see how the department was run and what they were working with. There were not so many Faculty meetings at the department, compared to what I am used too in Sweden, but the ones held were very concise and effective. All issues were put on a vote with all the faculty, and I thought that was a good way of doing it. I attended all meetings and work-days that I knew of and was struck by the effectiveness and work put in by all colleagues in different work groups, no matter if it was regarding new teaching organization, guidelines for promotions, upcoming guest lectures or seminar series.

AS the department consisted of more than 65 senior Faculty and almost 20 different sub fields of history there were always something going on. There were guest lectures and seminars about almost anything imaginable, and it felt as being on a never-ending conference at times. I tried to attend as many seminars/lectures I could and learnt a lot from them. There were often post-seminars afterwards at a local brewery and/or restaurant and I need to point out that the brewery scene in Columbus is awesome. The post-seminars were important places to meet and discuss research, teaching and life in general. It was also a venue where Professors and PhD students meet in a relaxed environment and had a good time.

IMPORTANT LESSONS

The time at the History department at Ohio State has given me a lot of new knowledge and perspectives, not least about how to conduct good teaching, many examples already mentioned earlier. It has also given me new perspectives on academic life and administration in American higher education. I know understand so much more about teaching in the US, on a very practical and hands on level. For instance, how teaching is conducted, administration regarding admissions, how to set up and start courses, ordering literature or borrowing texts from libraries, tuitions, and student life on campus. I also have a hunch about some of the myriad of acronyms used, not all of them but a lot more than when I first arrived.

Another thing that improved were my communicative skills in English. Eventually I did not notice if for example subtitles on films were on Swedish, English or non-existing. I listened to radio without reflecting on language, I dreamt in English and I went from writing "Swenglish" notes for myself in class to only write in English. Also everyday talk with students and colleagues, at stores or with people outside the academia gradually improved. Not a bad side effect at all.

I had talked to a few friends that have been on STINT Sabbaticals earlier and they all told me to make the most of this time and set my work from back home aside for this short period of time. I got the same feeling from the STINT meeting in Stockholm and from the documentation regarding the Sabbatical. So, that was exactly what I did. I only read mails from LTU sporadically, did not do any research or supervise any students during my stay. Instead I read a lot, especially literature connected to my course. I also made several field trips around Ohio to learn as much as I could about the region. Sometimes on my own but often with family and colleagues. This is something I really recommend for future STINT Fellows, to take time to explore and learn. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Embrace the chance!

Another lesson I've learnt on a personal level. It is difficult to move between countries and even though my English is good it has been a struggle to cope with all the paper work regarding for instance the VISA-application, social security, and drivers license (I bought a car and needed insurance and registration). Other things that took a lot of effort was renting a house and getting water, electricity, and gas ready. Also the staggering amount of work admitting the kids in Middle- and High School, selecting subjects and buying all the materials needed. On top of that settling at a new job and preparing for class... It took a few weeks to get everything in order but then it went smooth.

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE HOST AND THE HOME INSTITUTION

There is of course a lot of differences between my home institution and the host, but I also see all the resemblances between the history department at Ohio State and my own unit at LTU. Even though the group at Ohio State is enormous and ours is very small, with only eight colleagues, we still worked and struggled with the same kind of questions, for instance to get more students to enroll in courses, course development, criteria for promotion, and so on. The biggest difference was actually the mere size and scale of things, which made some things a bit more difficult at Ohio State.

The biggest differences from a teacher's perspective for me were the semester system, the scheduling, TA's, course development, and the student group. I have mentioned some of it earlier but will give a short summary here. History at Ohio State had a semester system, compared to the quarter system I am used to from LTU. This meant that the students had to take at least four different courses simultaneously during a semester. This also led to that the workload was staggering at times, and that the students, at times, concentrated more on other courses when there were examinations, which is totally understandably. If I would give the course again I would have had more examinations spread over the semester in order to have the work-load constant. Unfortunately, I did not realize this and no one told me about

it until the semester had started. This meant I had, sorry to say, all my examinations at the end of the semester.

Another thing I reacted upon that was different from what I am used to was the scheduling of classes. There were no room for changes or re-scheduling. Mostly because of the semester system and numbers of courses taken at the same time. I would have liked to have it more flexible, so I could change days and hours a few times as I lost a few Monday's due to Public holidays.

One thing I appreciated a lot was the freedom in which I could create the course, without any involvement from anyone else. When you make your own course, it is you on the line, you cannot blame anyone else for content or results, which is both a bit scary but also very rewarding if it works. In my case it went very well and my student evaluation score was well above the department's and Ohio State's average level. This has of course a lot to do with my student group as well, they were very nice and easy to work with, always quite prepared and most of them very eager to discuss.

Other things that comes to mind is the TA-system, something I would like to have here at LTU. Would be great to not have to go through all the examinations by myself, rather concentrate on the teaching aspects of higher education. I also learned that the American colleagues at Ohio State do not have as much meetings as we do back home. That is a drawback with our consensus culture and something that is very time consuming. Another thing is the almost total lack of socialization at work hours. People lock the doors to their offices and one have to make an appointment to even have a cup of coffee, not least lunch. I managed to have lunch at work with a few colleagues on a weekly basis after a while but I really missed the Swedish Fika. Being able to meet and have a short break and talk daily is a very good thing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Make contact with the hosting institution as early as possible and start with the paper work. It takes some time to get the VISA application in order and you need to book a time at the US Embassy in Stockholm for interviews.

Be direct and ask your academic and administrative contacts if there are things you do not understand, or wonder about. Start planning for the course/courses you are responsible for immediately and once again, ask for help if you feel uncertain about what they expect from you.

If you are taking children with you that are going to school, make sure you get a house in a good neighborhood as you have to live in the area where the school is. There are rating

systems and public schools can be really bad but also really good. Your kids need to be vaccinated before they can be admitted to school so check out the list of vaccines needed on the school's homepage.

Take time to enjoy your stay, travel and socialize with people. Remember - Americans are friendly!

ACTION PLAN: TOPICS TO ADDRESS AND, IF POSSIBLY, INTRODUCE IN SWEDEN

There are many things I will bring back to LTU and my work here, both regarding teaching and other aspects of work. I will definitely try to implement some of the methods I have seen during my stay, foremost the joy of teaching and the already described interaction with students, always correct and respectful. It's been a pleasure to see and understand how much time American teachers use in order to prepare for class, and in class how they also try to involve students in discussions, even in large survey courses. Teacher asking the students questions to keep them alert, discuss with them and also answer their questions. As my awareness of these aspects have deepened I think this is something my future students will benefit from.

I will also present my new perspective at LTU and my home department, but it has not been finalized yet. However, I have already talked with my fellow historians about some of my experiences from the classroom. It has been very good discussions. I will also be interviewed for our internal home page where I can briefly summarize my experiences.

I will also use my knowledge about American Higher Education in my role as departmental International Coordinator. It will help me in my work with incoming- and outgoing students and Faculty, especially coming from or going to US.

During my stay I discussed future collaboration with several colleagues, and we all agreed that this was only the beginning (I have already helped one PhD student from OSU with academic contacts with friends of mine in Norway). Me and the EHTS-group are staying in touch on social media and at least two of them have expressed a sincere desire to come and visit me and LTU in the short future. Fulbright has been mentioned, something I really hope could happen. I have also a standing invitation to come and present research and give a lecture or two if I wanted to. The chaired Professor actually said that he would have liked to have me at the history department.

FINALLY...

I can with ease state that my stay at Ohio State has been a wonderful experience, one of the best I have had as an adult.

During my stay, my family and I, were often invited to colleagues for dinner parties and other kinds of social activities, sometimes only with us but quite often with other friends and/or colleagues. This went on almost every week during our stay and sometimes we could have three dinner-invitations from Friday to Sunday. We also spent Thanksgiving, Chanukkah, Christmas, and New Years Eve with American families, which gave us a wonderful experience. We have never had such a social life before, and we all enjoyed it tremendously, even our kids did as many of my colleagues had children in their age. The social gatherings were so nice as we really learned to know several wonderful people, both colleagues and friends of colleagues, with whom we still stay in touch and call friends. People we miss sorely. I believe this has been the most rewarding aspect of the STINT Fellowship.