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Ensuring continuity in teaching at a university based on impermanent employment

Peter Bengtsen

This paper is based on a roundtable discussion held in September 2016 as part of the *Pedagogical Inspiration Conference for teachers at the Joint Faculties for Humanities and Theology* at Lund University. The roundtable was meant to focus specifically on the consequences of the lack of permanent teaching positions for the quality of the pedagogical work carried out at the university. However, as will be discussed below, the conversation during the roundtable session soon revealed the difficulties in discussing the pedagogical issues without also getting into related topics pertaining to the employment experience of participants as well as the work environment at Lund University more generally.

Background

Since I finished my PhD thesis in June 2014, I have lived what I consider a stimulating but also somewhat precarious life at Lund University. It is no secret that permanent teaching positions are hard to come by, and even during my time as a PhD candidate, I began considering what the lack of permanent positions means for the pedagogical work carried out at the university. These reflections were not in the first place due to my own temporary position at the time, but rather a consequence of serving as course administrator on the interdisciplinary MA course »The City: Boun-

dary Transgressions and Visual Expressions«. The course included teachers working on temporary contracts (including other PhD candidates who were closer to finishing than I was). This sometimes made planning and course development difficult, as it would often be unclear if central teachers would be available going forward.¹

As Svinicki and McKeachie have pointed out, an important part of developing pedagogical skills is actively discussing teaching practices with peers, as well as observing colleagues as they teach.² Teaching classes together and having conversations about our specific pedagogical practice, as well as the course more generally, were absolutely essential elements in the development of »The City: Boundary Transgressions and Visual Expressions«. However, speaking to the theme of the present paper, while this close collaboration was very fruitful, it also brought to the forefront the difficulties that arose when a member of teacher group became unavailable from one year to the next.

Finishing my own PhD thesis and subsequently teaching as a temporary staff member on a number of different courses, I have had the reason to revisit the question about what the lack of permanent positions means for the pedagogical work carried out at Lund University. In my experience, two of the cornerstones of quality teaching are *planning* and *continuity*. That is to say, the ability to plan ahead and follow up on experiences from previous teaching in order to continuously improve course content as well as personal teaching skills. The importance of planning and continuity is of course also pertinent to all the work that surrounds the actual teaching. For pedagogical and administrative reasons, any substantial revision of course plans, as well as practical preparations (e.g. creating schedules, booking rooms, contracting guest teachers, arranging excursions and selecting

¹ For more details about this MA course, see Peter Bengtsen, Moa Goysdotter & Anna Hedlund, »Interdisciplinarity, group responsibility and conflict as resources for learning«: Alexander Maurits & Katarina Mårtensson (eds.), *Högskolepedagogisk reflektion och praktik: Proceedings från Humanistiska och teologiska fakulteternas pedagogiska inspirationskonferens 2012*. Lund: Humanistiska och teologiska fakulteterna, Lunds universitet, 2014, pp. 35–44.

² Marilla Svinicki & Wilbert J. McKeachie (eds.), *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, 13th edition. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2011, p. 335.

course literature), generally have to be undertaken at least one semester in advance of giving a course. This means that the person responsible for a certain course given during a fall semester needs to take time out to make these preparations during the spring of the same year. For staff working on permanent contracts, this may seem like a matter of routine. The problem, however, is that these (otherwise generally constructive) expectations for planning and continuity tend to clash with the lack of continuity in terms of employment.

Given that all available positions must be filled in open competition, temporary staff members will often not know for sure half a year in advance if their employment at the university will continue. Furthermore, temporary staff may shift between teaching and research positions (this is also true of permanent staff members that receive research funding), which further complicates things. Situations have occurred, for example, where someone is temporarily employed as a researcher, but is asked to take time from their research to plan for the following semester a course they have taught previously, without any guarantee that they will actually be teaching it again. This is obviously problematic, since this practice requires the temporary employee to take it on faith that they will eventually be compensated for the advance work they do when preparing the course. If the employee ends up not being re-hired for the following term, any preparation work they may have put in will potentially remain unpaid.

From the point of view of the structure put in place to ensure continuity, this way of preparing courses seems to make sense, as it ostensibly ensures previous experiences with a given course are taken into account (although one might question how the quality of the pedagogical work is affected if the employee who does the planning ends up not actually being involved when the course is given). For the individual temporary employees who are asked to do the planning work on faith, however, a dilemma arises: should they engage in the planning to ensure pedagogical quality and continuity without any guarantee of compensation, knowing that doing so contributes to keeping in place the very system of impermanent employment that creates the dilemma in the first place?

In the abstract for the roundtable discussion, I included the following non-exhaustive list of possible topics for discussion:

- Ways that the status as a temporary employee may impede pedagogical performance.
- Ways to overcome the pedagogical and practical challenges in planning and teaching that impermanent employment creates.
- Experiences with expectations from colleagues (teachers, administrative staff, programme administrators, etc.) regarding the involvement of temporary staff in the planning of courses they may not end up teaching, as well as responses from temporary staff to these expectations.
- Ways the university can/does handle the loss of experience that comes with impermanent staff members not having an opportunity to follow up and develop courses they have taught.

Events leading up to the roundtable discussion

Before sending in an abstract for the pedagogical conference, I had spoken to colleagues who all had their own stories to tell regarding impermanent employment and the effect it has had on both a professional and a personal level.³ Indeed, it was mainly these informal conversations that convinced me it would be a good idea to engage in a more formal discussion about the topic in the context of the pedagogical conference. In advance of the roundtable, I sent out an email to invite colleagues to attend and participate in the discussion. I soon received a number replies, and I list three of these in full here:

Hi Peter, this sounds very interesting! Unfortunately I am in [located redacted] that day and so I am unable to participate. But perhaps it will be possible to partake of the outcome later in some way? These are important issues for many/everyone at the department.

³ In addition to the pedagogical issues that are meant to be the focus here, the insecurity that comes with impermanent employment can also have profound effects on one's ability to plan one's personal life (e.g. accommodation, family planning, etc.). Needless to say, afflictions like stress and depression stemming from insecure work conditions may further complicate the task of maintaining pedagogical continuity.

Good that you are taking it upon yourself to drive this discussion, Peter! I will be in [location redacted] on the day of the roundtable, and will not be able to participate.

There are many pertinent, central – and maybe (?) difficult-to-solve issues raised in your paper. I hope there will be a fruitful discussion. Unfortunately I will not be able to come and listen.

The three emails quoted above all have at least two things in common. First, all three authors clearly express the view that a discussion about the consequences of impermanent employment on pedagogical practice is important. Second, they all express regret at not being able to attend the roundtable. I received additional emails, all following the same structure. As will be made clear below, this was symptomatic for how attendance at the roundtable eventually turned out.

The roundtable discussion

The roundtable itself was rather poorly attended. A total of 7 people were present, including myself and the roundtable moderator. Of the five other attendees, four were junior scholars. The low number of participants, as well as the relatively homogenous positions they occupy within the organization of the university, meant that the discussion did not represent as many different perspectives as it might otherwise have. It would have been interesting, for example, to hear from more senior employees and employees with permanent contracts. From emails received in advance of the conference, it is clear that there are also pedagogical frustrations regarding impermanent employment among those with permanent contracts, for example because it makes course planning difficult.

The discussion during the roundtable essentially affirmed that the tendency to rely on impermanent employees at the university is a multilayered problem. Since the theme of the roundtable so firmly ties into issues related to work environment, and because impermanent employment influences employees on a number of levels (e.g. professionally, socially, personally), it turned out to be difficult to keep the discussion focused specifi-

cally on pedagogical issues. Again, this might have been different if more people, representing a wider variety of experiences related specifically to pedagogy, had been in attendance.

In regards to possible solutions to the issue under discussion, minor adjustments – such as moving payment for course planning tasks to the semester before a course is given in order to overcome the challenge of »planning on faith« – were suggested to ensure continuity on fairer terms. Addressing the problems with impermanent employment at the home division of the individual was also brought up as important, although it was recognized that the structural nature of the problem cannot entirely be solved at the division or department levels. A further difficulty arises from the fact that impermanent employees are in a vulnerable position, which can lead to fear of negative repercussions (e.g. replacement, discontinuation of employment) as a result of criticizing work conditions. Irrespective of how likely this is to happen, the fear of being seen as difficult or uncooperative is a real concern among impermanent employees, which might prevent some from speaking up.

Conclusion

The roundtable discussion, as well my correspondence with other employees leading up to it, has yielded information that may be useful moving forward. The experiences relayed by the roundtable participants, as well as the sentiments expressed in the emails I received in response to my abstract, have clearly confirmed that impermanent employment constitutes a significant challenge for ensuring continuity in teaching. As has been described above, while this problem seems to be widely recognized both among permanent and impermanent staff, no clear solution has been found. This is not surprising. The ambition of the roundtable was never to solve the entire structural problem of impermanent employment, but rather to identify specific issues based on the concrete experiences of the roundtable participants in order to initiate an open discussion about partial, and often local, solutions.

The relatively low number of participants at the roundtable meant that the discussion lacked the views of especially senior staff and permanent

employees, who might have been in a position to identify additional issues that need to be addressed. However, it is my hope that the roundtable and this resultant paper can serve as the first steps to initiate this important conversation.

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- Bengtson, Peter, Moa Goysdotter & Anna Hedlund, »Interdisciplinarity, group responsibility and conflict as resources for learning«: Alexander Maurits & Katarina Mårtensson (eds.), *Högskolepedagogisk reflektion och praktik: Proceedings från Humanistiska och teologiska fakulteternas pedagogiska inspirationskonferens 2012*. Lund: Humanistiska och teologiska fakulteterna, Lunds universitet, 2014, pp. 35–44.
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