

International Political Science

University Teaching in Finland: Parting Observations of a Fulbrighter

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The possibility of spending a semester or a year abroad via the Fulbright program, without interrupting one's career development (indeed often enhancing it), is unquestionably one of the great potential perks of an academic life. The sheer range of Fulbright positions is astounding. Some are for research, some for lecturing, and some are combined positions; some have closely specified needs, while others are open competitions for all fields; and every country in the world has positions. My own country choice, Finland, was dictated by various factors ranging from prior intellectual and research interest to personal fascination with this small, peripheral European country, even though, unlike most Americans with an interest in Finland, I can claim no direct familial lineage from the Nordic region.

As a student of international relations, it was an exciting time to be abroad. As a political scientist, the timing of my year (1993–94) could scarcely have been more serendipitous. Finland is in the throes of a post-Cold War adjustment (politically liberating, but economically painful), with newly independent neighbors like Estonia and Latvia opening new possibilities for Baltic trade, tourism, and educational exchange. The country was in the midst of a long debate on the merits of European Union membership (in a national referendum, Finland voted to join the EU in November 1994, after I had left); and all the above was punctuated by an unusual and, in an understated Finnish way, at times even exciting, midwinter presidential election campaign.

Given the obvious difficulty of

encapsulating a year's worth of experiences in a few pages, I will limit my comments mainly to educational differences, from the point of view of a lecturer more or less integrated into a foreign academic department, as opposed to being a free-floating researcher with only a loose university affiliation.

Unlike several colleagues, who have arrived on foreign campuses with only a vague notion of what their expectations were, my own teaching schedule had been planned meticulously in advance, down to course titles and even class hours (which, happily, could be and were altered upon arrival—I am no more enamored of giving 8 a.m. Monday morning lectures than I was listening to them as a student). My task was particularly challenging because I went to teach international relations and European politics, rather than scholarly versions of Americana, to European students.

My position was in a relatively new program called the International School of Social Sciences [ISSS], started at the University of Tampere just five years ago as an interdisciplinary program offering an array of English-language courses and majors at the undergraduate and, increasingly, graduate levels. It is loosely attached to the departments of political science and international relations, though is still a separate body with its own small (and highly competent) administrative staff and budget. The program is designed to cater both to the growing number of foreign students in Finland, and to Finns interested in studying or working abroad.

It was an opportunity to participate in a new and developing pro-

gram while also being exposed to a "normal" European academic department, with its hierarchical structure and heavy demands on the departmental chair. I thus felt unusually well positioned to make at least some contribution both to the academic and organizational sides of the equation, which helped compensate for the relatively restricted free time available for research.

The ISSS program has been called experimental, and by Finnish standards it is. Unlike most Finnish academic departments, it emphasizes smaller classes, flexibility in offerings, and close interaction between faculty, students, and staff, all within a self-consciously international milieu (for example, through an active partnership, involving dual teaching, with Tartu University in Estonia).

The Finnish government recently acknowledged the school as "center of excellence," a testament to the active encouragement of interdisciplinary and internationally minded program innovations in the traditionally closed world of Finnish state-run education. The fruits of these labors are especially impressive because Finland is hardly the sort of place that comes to mind as a window on the world—the prospect of eight-month winters and high Nordic prices is not a major drawing card for visitors.

During the fall term, I offered several lecture courses, including short courses in European politics, American-European relations, and contemporary political issues, and followed those up in the spring with smaller seminars in the first two subject-areas for upper-level students. I also undertook, to the

mild astonishment of some, but admittedly on popular demand, the additional work of conducting a weekly discussion group for about 15 students, built around topical issues and regular reading assignments. On the other hand, anticipated contact with advanced Ph.D. students never materialized.

This undoubtedly sounds like the sort of teaching load from which most American academics would gladly escape for a year, and it was not light by any means, although it was generally less onerous than a similar load in a U.S. university. There were no detailed syllabi to prepare in advance, no midterms to grade (only written finals), fewer advising demands, and, most strikingly for the lecture courses, no reading assignments to coordinate with lecture topics. In the absence of such rigamarole, and freed from time-consuming committee assignments (the hidden bane of modern academic life), I was in fact able to prepare lectures while leaving some time for my own reading and research and, of course, for getting a taste of life in the far north.

In Finland, the distinction between lecture courses and seminars is clear and deliberate. The former typically runs for 24 hours for one credit—not, thankfully, all at once but rather in 12 two-hour sessions, or (in my case, to free up a research day) six four-hour sessions. During those sessions, the lecturer lectures, and the students take notes, all in a rather formal and serious atmosphere that can verge on the severe without the deliberate adoption of tension-breaking mechanisms (though jokes go only so far). There is little of the banter that often characterizes the more open American classroom, in which the lecturer is expected to be part entertainer.

While one description I read there, that Finnish students tend to resemble “cowed stenographers” seemed unkind, there is nonetheless a socialized expectation of minimal give-and-take in the classroom, an expectation of which the ISSS approach is a welcome exception. Indeed, students not only anticipate a nonstop 45-minute talk for each scheduled class hour, but

they expect each lecture to be outlined on written transparencies, the machines for which are standard issue in every classroom. This admittedly took some getting used to; for my first long session, I was up half the night before writing out some 17 transparency pages, an effort which merely succeeded in wearing me out and annoying several students who, after all, were grappling with what was, for most, their third language. Brevity in subsequent classes won many friends.

Oddly, one of my most vivid early memories is one of silence—especially those agonizing seconds (sometimes many of them) after asking them, collectively, a question on the material at hand, and before someone could work up the nerve to respond. It seems that “saving face” before one’s peers, not wanting to appear ignorant, is a driving force behind the reticence of most Finnish students in larger classes. The answer, when it did come, was typically well considered and often even intelligent. Whereas American students too often speak without thinking, Finnish students tend to think without speaking!

It was a wholly different story, however, in the smaller seminars, in which I witnessed a number of lively exchanges, especially if some sensitive issue of Finnish history or politics was broached. I was astonished when, after mentioning in passing the Finnish “note crisis” of 1961 during one session, a fiercely animated debate spontaneously erupted. The old cliché about the “silent Finn” goes only so far.

It is hard to compare student workloads. On the one hand, class for class, students there are generally required to produce less work; with little reading required, exams tend to be based on lecture notes. Most seminars require a single written paper, although the process—public defense of the paper before the group, collectively read beforehand—is surely nerve-wracking in another language. On the other hand, students seem to log more hours in-class, and take more lecture courses per year, especially if they are doubling up on their schedules. Often they also read ex-

tensively on the side, in preparation for the dreaded “book-exams” (in Finland, lack of lecturers means that many courses can be passed by taking an exam based on an assigned book or two).

All in all, in comparison with life at the Boston campus at which I teach, the students in Finland, usually a little older and often better prepared, seem more interested in the subject material, and tend to regard learning as an end in itself and not merely a means to a degree and a job. This mind-set makes them simultaneously more serious and intellectually minded (though my Finnish colleagues might well dispute this), and definitely less harried and stressed than their American counterparts facing endless exams and paper deadlines. Much of this attitude may stem from the selectivity of the Finnish university system (where only about one in five applicants is admitted), in which most of the students appear to be there as a privilege and not as a right. Happily, they also demand and complain less.

The overall situation of the typical Finnish student, in fact, mirrors wider trends throughout Europe. They tend to take longer to complete their degree work, assume more responsibility for determining their own schedules and ensuring proper credits, and ultimately face huge uncertainties after university (given an unemployment rate of around 18%). Despite all the economic problems, however, Finland shows few outward signs of social decay; even the too-common sight of public drunkenness among young and old alike seems less economically than culturally driven.

One valuable aspect of choosing such a nonmainstream country is that it offers a potentially more enlightening cultural experience, since the visitor is compelled to regard Finland not via American values, but on its own terms. There is little of the outright contempt that one occasionally finds in, say, Britain or Germany, which is partly a negative reaction stemming from the trans-Atlantic institutional ties created since 1945. Finland, however, strictly neutral and forced by geography to keep a low international

profile in the Cold War, has never really been in a dependent position vis-a-vis the United States, not having joined NATO (though there is some talk of this for the future) and famously repaying, in full, all its wartime debts.

The years of relative insulation and emphasis on domestic development have reinforced a strong and justifiable national pride in having built, in a few decades, a prosperous, postmodern society out of the terrible destruction of World War II. At the same time, post-Cold War Finland is preoccupied increasingly with European affairs, a trend which will likely accelerate now that Finland, along with Sweden, has joined the European Union.

Many Finns view American society on the whole with considerable admiration, though tempered by puzzlement at the contrast between a global political role and a seeming inability or lack of will to solve societal ills (lack of national health care; urban violence and decay) on the home front. Much of this latent negativism is fed by news reports and feature films dwelling on the antisocial aspects of American society. Unfortunately, many of the virtues, such as the openness and dynamism of life here, are intangi-

bles that are less easily conveyed, despite the miracles of modern telecommunications (my cable television service delivered, along with several European stations, nightly broadcasts of Larry King Live and Jay Leno).

One refrain which surfaced repeatedly in my American-European relations class was the well-known American ignorance about Finland and Europe generally—which is true enough, even though, as one of my Finnish-American students aptly pointed out, Europeans have to learn about only one United States, whereas Americans are faced with dozens of European countries with separate histories and traditions, not to mention a European Union.

There is a surprising amount of pleasure, even pride, derived from the challenge of being a representative—and possibly, as an academic, a notable exception—of a society whose intellectual contributions are often seen by Europeans as suspect or negligible, or at least surpassed in significance by mass-marketed ephemery. The American abroad inevitably has a representative function, which may be quite conscious and direct, but can also be latent and indirect, even unwitting. Finns, ever respectful of others'

privacy, seem genuinely appreciative of time spent getting to know them and their society better, especially outside the restricting confines of the office or department. Equally, this is a valuable way for them to get to know ours.

Perhaps the single biggest challenge to the academic abroad is to balance one's efforts to fit into new surroundings while also being true to the individual and societal values that shape our experience. Europeans tend to be more group-oriented and aware of social ties than Americans, but when abroad one becomes acutely conscious of many overlapping associations—with the profession, with the university community, with our own nationality. Such a representative role may seem a burden, but it also creates a positive sense of responsibility which, if carried with a modicum of grace, patience and good humor, can do wonders on a small scale for international understanding.

About the Author

John F.L. Ross was a Fulbright fellow in international relations at the University of Tampere, Finland, while on leave from Northeastern University during 1993–94.