Course evaluation
“Media, War and Journalism” (MEVIT 3427/JOUR4427)

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The course “Media, War and Journalism” ran for the second time at IMK in spring 2017.

Organization My preference in principle remained, as last year, to run weekly interactive sessions that combined both lecture and seminar. This format, in my experience, is very effective in bringing together theory and hands-on practice by students. However, again due to the high number of students enrolled (54 this year; 51 in 2016), this would have been problematic in practice. That is why the course ran through weekly 2-hours lectures and 2-hours seminars (one seminar groups for BA students, another one for MA). This format proved nonetheless to work well. It also appears to fit students’ expectations about timetable, although it is noticeable, as proved by lower attendance at the seminars, that some students seem (wrongly) to regard them as “less important” than lectures.

Results The course achieved its learning objectives. Most students, both at BA and MA level engaged with the topic and achieved good results in the final home exam. Average grade: C.

Changes from last year These were introduced both to incorporate student feedback and to better align course activities to learning objectives and assessment.

1) Syllabus: Last year, consistently with the learning objective of encouraging greater independence of thought and a critical attitude to the literature, I had included additional texts on the syllabus that, although not compulsory, would enable students to follow their own interest in preparing for the final exam. This, however, appeared to be quite confusing for them. They clearly preferred a more definite list of what needed to be read. This year the list of materials was thus more prescriptive.

2) Short essay instead of presentation as obligatory activity: Although developing presentations skills is important, given the weight placed by this course on developing a critical stance towards the literature and the fact that the final evaluation is a written home exam, presentations were removed altogether as obligatory activity. They were replaced, as also suggested by students in the course feedback, with a shorter written assignment (one essay of 1,500 words). The essay was evaluated as pass/not-pass and detailed individual feedback was provided. The feedback included recommendations of aspects each student should work on in order to improve his/her writing and analysis in view of the home exam. This also freed time during the seminars that was previously taken by the presentations. Seminars could thus be used entirely for in-depth discussion of concepts presented in the lectures, and analysis of cases/examples related to current affairs. The objective was to enable students to practice the critical analysis skills that would be assessed in the final evaluation.

Feedback from students: Students were asked to provide feedback on the aspects that they thought worked well and what could be improved. They did so towards the end of the course, on anonymous post-its that were collected at the end of the class. Here are the quotes of the points that were mentioned:
Positive aspects
- Excellent teaching; great course, good teacher; you have a strong wish to get us engaged
- Great topics + range of issues; lectures are good and interesting; engaging content; interesting lectures (2 mentions); lectures very informative; I really liked the topics covered in lectures and seminars: they were relevant and interesting
- Good powerpoints; clear powerpoints
- Interesting syllabus; a well put together compendium (and syllabus in general); effective, comprehensive syllabus; a little too extensive reading list for a lower-grade Norwegian [this was put among the positive aspects, though], good job!; good literature
- Well-balanced workload
- Good (modern, too!) examples; great extent of information in the lectures and on the slides (videos, links, etc..!); good media use; videos & visual sources; good to have slides with videos; lots of videos; visual helps such as videos and examples
- Lots of students activities & easy to get involved!
- Good availability of material on Fronter; things are online; I appreciate that slides of all classes are online
- Clear lecture/seminar structure
- Good discussions in class with good mix of topics; seminars [mentioned alone as good aspect of the course]; very good discussions with open class, opinions valued; good discussions in class, though I prefer larger groups discussion to small groups (might just be me); everyone can discuss the topic; seminars with group tasks, videos, inviting students to ask/answer questions; interesting discussions and good interaction among students and between students and teacher; he cases we studied in the seminars were interesting and good to illustrate the topic
- Had lots of fun! Very interesting subject!; It was interesting; in this class there is a playful context
- Interactivity

Aspects students thought could be improved
- After the 3rd or 4th seminar there did not seem to be much discussion of the readings. I would have liked to see more of this; talk more about the readings in the seminars [mentioned twice]; perhaps more activities connected to the literature
- Too long break between teaching and exam [mentioned three times]
- Too much reading some days, we also have other subjects
- I like the lecture but the speed is too fast for me; sometimes too fast for non-English native speakers, too much information in one lecture, so it is hard to keep up; I am not good at English, so sometimes cannot read the words you write on the board during seminars
- I would like to finish the class on time; slightly unorganized class in terms of breaks
- Some people take too much space in the discussion

Response to students’ comments
The students’ feedback was overwhelmingly positive. It shows that they found the course engaging, particularly appreciating the incorporation of media material (especially videos) and the class discussions, which involved a variety of activities and work on current cases and examples, during seminars. It is great to hear that many students found the topics covered interesting, even fun. Many positive comments were also made about the syllabus. This shows that the changes introduced from last year (more prescriptive list of reading; no presentations to free-up discussion space at seminars) did produce the desired results.
3 students did mention that they would have liked to focus more on the reading during seminars. While in the future I will try as much as possible to establish references to the reading material, focusing mostly on the content of the reading would also mean having less discussion. Based on previous experience, it tends to be a minority who prepares for class by doing the reading. Working on cases I have prepared specifically for the seminar (starting activities from a text, image or video in class) allows everyone to be able to contribute.

Three students mentioned that, due to their weak English, the lecture was at times not as easy to follow. All other students appeared to be fine with the delivery of the lectures and seminars—in fact the variety and richness of content is very often mentioned among the positive aspects of the course—so I am not taking any action in terms of changes for next year (students are also always encouraged to ask questions and they can say whether they feel I am going too fast). From marking the essays it is clear, though, that low English skills do have a negative effect on students’ performance (poor writing and grammar; not well-researched texts presumably due to the inability to gain an in-depth understanding of sources). I will raise the question of whether English language requirements to take the class should be introduced (or explicit warnings given to students) in upcoming teaching meetings.

One student mentioned issues with the timing of the class. It is true that it finished over time by a handful of minutes a couple of times and that breaks were taken at different times every week. This is part of enabling interactivity (sometimes students contributions take more time than expected) and the fact that I prefer to take breaks at a point when they are not interrupting the content flow of the lecture. All other students seemed to be fine with this. I will do my best, however, to ensure that the class finishes always on time in the future.

Changes planned for next year

1) **Consider the feasibility of introduction obligatory attendance** I had already mentioned this option in last year’s report. It appeared quite problematic to implement as it requires careful monitoring of presence in class and clear guidelines about which proportion of attendance should allow students taking the final exam (and conversely which reasons are acceptable to justify non-attendance). However, attendance and participation are still keys to achieving the learning objectives. The students who fail or underperform tend invariably to be those who do not turn up. In addition to this the course is not designed to be long-distance learning: the powerpoint files of the lectures are uploaded on Fronter as a convenient reference. They are only useful as notes, but are not designed to replace attendance.

2) **Consider an alternative to the home exam** This measure is designed to address two problematic issues. First at least 3 students have mentioned that the gap (two months, in fact) between the time of teaching and the final exam is not ideal. I totally agree. An option is moving my teaching closer to the exam period (which is fixed). I am thinking, however, to look into whether the home exam can be replaced by another kind of written assignment students can work on and submit closer to the end of the course, regardless of when this takes place, and which does not have to be produced within 72 hours. This kind of assignment, by not putting students under strict time pressures, would contribute addressing a second issue: it might help them (especially those whose first language is not English) in writing better-researched and more critical essays.
What is expected of students

No amount of changes in the way a course is organized can make up for a lack of engagement by students. What I expect is:

1) attendance of ALL lectures and seminars: the sessions of the course are designed as a journey. The course makes sense as a whole. It is unrealistic to be able to get the most out of a course by relying on powerpoint slides on Fronter or a couple of visits. The course is NOT designed as a distance learning one.

2) Participation to class discussions. I realize that we are not all equally comfortable speaking in public. What I expect is that every student tries to get just a little bit beyond his/her comfort zone at every session. It takes time, but consistent effort will produce results. I was myself a person who was afraid to speak. If I can change, so can you.

3) I cannot help noticing that it is mostly the male students who put themselves forward in the discussions. That is why, whenever a woman would like to speak at a seminar, I tend to prioritize her. I would really like to see more of the female students contribute to the seminars in the future.