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Periodic evaluation spring 2009

MEVIT4800 Perspectives and methods in media research

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The course and evaluation

From course description:

Course content:

This course presents and discusses methodology issues that are central to empirical research. The course will explore different methodological approaches including for example comparative analysis, case studies, research interviews, content analysis and basic quantitative analysis. The course will reflect on the relation between theoretical perspectives and methodological choices.

Learning outcomes:

The course aims to enable students to

- a) design and conduct their own scientific investigations within media and communication research,
- b) assess existing research, and
- c) discuss methodological issues critically.

This course was given the first time this spring. It is a 10 credits course on the master's level. It is compulsory for students in Media studies to have at least one course in methodology. Most

students therefore take MEVIT4800.

The students have evaluated the course in three steps:

- They filled in a questionnaire about their expectations on the first lecture (attachment 1).
- They had a mid-term evaluation as an oral discussion.
- They filled in an online questionnaire after the lectures were completed (attachment 2).

On an overall level, the students had very high expectations to the course. On the first lecture, 32 out of 35 students answered that they expected that the course would be very useful or useful to them (attachment 1). These were expectations that were hard to meet. After all lectures were completed, 18 out of 27 students reported that the lectures had been useful or very useful (attachment 2). This, of course, indicates that the initial expectations were unrealistically high. It does, however, also demonstrate that there is room for improvement in the course and discussing this is the main purpose of this report.

The course aims to fill very many needs, and this is of course challenging. These are some of the main ambitions and challenges of the course:

Students with and without former training in methodology:

- Taking a course in methodology is obligatory for all master students and most master students take MEVIT4800. The course is intended to build on MEVIT2800, which is the course on methods on the bachelor level. MEVIT4800 should therefore be more advanced than the bachelor course and provide reflection on a higher level.
- The master students do, however, have a very varying background. Students who have taken their bachelor degrees at IMK, typically have MEVIT2800,. This is, however, a minority of the students. At the beginning of term the student's were asked what their background in methodology were (see attachment 1). Only 11 students out of 35 reported that they had such background from IMK. The others had no background (9 students) or other background (15 students). The other category was very diverse, consisting of students who reported that they had quite advanced courses in methodology – and students who had taken the introductory course provided at the beginning of term only (see below) and considered this their background.
- This situation was anticipated when planning the course. Two main measures were taken:
 - The course was planned to be on a higher level than the bachelor course. Whereas the bachelor course was a toolbox course providing students with methods to handle empirical questions, the master course should be on a meta-level, reflecting on methodological choices and relations between theoretical and methodological issues.
 - To facilitate that students who did not have a background in methods would be able to follow the course, an introductory course was provided. This was an intensive course with three lectures given the week before the ordinary lectures began. The introductory course was designed as a very short version of the bachelor course and about 15 students attended this course.
- The ambition of integrating students with and without a background in methodology was

challenging, yet possible. In the mid-term evaluation, many students were concerned that the course was a difficult course with very many concepts from various academic traditions. The course was difficult, but not impossible, for the students. As the exam results show, most students learned a lot through the course and mastered the concepts and issues very well.

Norwegian and international students

- The course was given to students at both the Norwegian and the International master programmes. The course was therefore given in English (but they could write their exams in Norwegian). This is the first time that a course that was obligatory in the Norwegian master programme is given in English only. Methodology is also considered a difficult course with very many difficult concepts which make language barriers extra challenging.
- At the first lecture, students were asked about their expectations towards having the course in English (attachment 1). 10 of the students answered that they found this good as they do not speak Norwegian, 16 of the students answered that they speak Norwegian, but that their English is good enough, and 9 students said that they found this challenging. Thus, there was a large minority who found it challenging that the course was given in English only.
- In the final evaluation, the students were asked how challenging it had been that the course had been held in English (attachment 2). 25 students answered this questionnaire. At this point, 4 students reported that this was very challenging and had made the course a lot more difficult, 8 students answered that it had been challenging, but had gone ok, 6 students reported that this was ok as their English was good enough, and 8 students answered that they don't speak Norwegian anyway.
- This indicates that having the course in English is challenging for quite a few of the Norwegian-speaking students. Most do, however, cope ok with this challenge. Further, many students do not understand Norwegian and need the course to take place in English. There seem to be three ways to cope with this challenge:
 - Split the course in two and start providing a Norwegian course in addition to the English one. The exam results indicate that this is not necessary.
 - Live with the challenge and continue providing the course in English only, but try to be very thorough in description of concepts. This may be a sufficient solution.
 - Continue providing the course in English, and give all lectures in English, but facilitate a Norwegian-speaking work-group (there are two work groups and one could be in English and the other in Norwegian). This may be a good solution, but should be assessed against the effect this will have on making a division between the local and the international students.

Students with diverging master projects:

- Master students are recommended to take this course in the second semester of their Master studies. This means that they have already made a project description for their master project. Many students are therefore quite determined about what methods and methodological issues they want to explore, and which they find irrelevant.
- This was a concern we partly met through letting the students chose what issues to explore in their portfolio assignment. Apart from that we ignored this concern. The reason was that

general knowledge about methodological issues is useful anyway and also highly relevant for their later career.

Lectures

The full lecture plan is available here:

<http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/imk/MEVIT4800/v09/undervisningsplan.xml>

Before the ordinary lectures started, an introductory course for students who did not have any background in methodology was offered. This introductory course was given by Tanja Storsul and consisted of 3 lectures and was a mini-version key issues covered in MEVIT2800. About 15 students followed this introductory course.

The ordinary lectures consisted of 9 lectures given by 6 teachers (Tanja Storsul, Tore Slaatta, Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud, Sigurd Allern, Synne Skjulstad and Faltin Karlsen). About 30 students followed the lectures.

A majority of the students found the lectures useful. In the final evaluation, 18 of 27 students answered that the lectures had been very useful or useful (attachment 2).

The lectures covered many perspectives and approaches to studying media. This makes the course a bit fragmented, but it gives students a broad overview. More emphasis on overall issues of epistemology could have provided better links between the different approaches.

Work groups

The plan for the work groups is available here:

<http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/imk/MEVIT4800/v09/planworkgroup.xml>

The students were divided into 2 work groups that both had 7 meetings all led by Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud. At the meetings they discussed issues from the lectures and reading list – and they discussed their portfolio assignment. All supervision for the portfolio assignments was given in the work groups.

The work groups were not considered as useful as the lectures by the students. In the final evaluation only 5 students answered that they found the work groups useful, 16 found them not useful, and 6 had not participated (attachment 2).

The students' written comments as well as the discussion in the mid-term evaluation indicates that there are at least two issues that could be addressed in order to improve the work groups:

- The students' expectations to the work groups vary considerably. By making the purpose of the work groups clearer at the beginning of term, the students may get more realistic

- expectations. Both the teacher responsible for the course and the seminar leader should address this.
- The students consider the course difficult and they ask for more time in work groups to discuss concepts and methodological approaches. In the future, the work groups should continue discussing both the portfolio assignment and concepts and issues from the reading list. The balance could, however, be changed a bit in order to allow more time for discussing methodological issues from the lectures and reading list. A good balance could be approximately 50/50 between discussing such concepts and issues – and the portfolio assignment.

Literature and course content

The full reading list is available here:

<http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/imk/MEVIT4800/v09/pensumliste.xml>

The most important consideration behind the reading list was to find literature that would cover the issues of the course in a good way. Another concern was to avoid asking the students to buy very many different books with only some chapters to read in each. Very many articles were therefore selected from Bruhn Jensen's anthology.

Most students found the literature on the reading list useful. In the final evaluation 22 students answered that the literature had been very useful or useful, whereas 5 found it not useful and 1 did not know/had not read much (attachment 2).

The reading list should be critically reviewed for next term. Following feedback from students and lecturers, some suggestions would be:

- The reading list could be more thorough on epistemological issues.
- It should be considered to change the literature that covers textual analysis.
- Hellevik's book on causal analysis should be replaced by something that discusses issues of causal analysis and/or correlation analysis on a more overall level.
- Taylor's article on grounded theory should be replaced, for example by an article by Louise Madden from 2009.
- Consider if using the Bruhn Jensen anthology to such a large extent is the best solution.

Exam

The exam consists of two exams that each count 50% of the final grade.

- Portfolio assessment.
- School exam (4 hours).

Both exams must be passed to receive a passing grade in this course.

The mix between a school exam that encourages students to learn all issues in the course, and a portfolio assignment that allows them to focus on an issue close to their own master project seems

to be a good strategy.

The portfolio assignment was supposed to be a methodological reflection on an empirical scientific enquiry (or a comparison of two). This was an assignment that made the students consider critically how methodology was used in a scientific work (or two) of their choice. It made it possible for very good students to use their knowledge, whereas it was a difficult assignment for students who did not master the course that well.

The portfolio assignment is described here:

<http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/imk/MEVIT4800/v09/undervisningsmateriale/Portefolio.xml>

1. Deviations from the course description

The course was held according to the course description.

2. Quantitative data

44 students signed up for the course. 42 of these took the exam and 38 passed the exam. The 4 students who failed their exam all failed on the school exam.

Grades:

A: 5 students

B: 19 students

C: 10 students

D: 4 students

E: 0 students

F: 4 students

No show: 2 students

Total: 44 students

The exam results showed many good grades with 24 students getting an A or a B. This is partly a result of the final grade being the mean between the grade given at their school exam and the portfolio assignment in which the rule is that adding the grades should be to the students' advantage so that the mean between a B and a C is a B. Another and maybe the most important explanation for the good results is that very many students worked hard and managed to understand the complexities of the course. A third explanation may be that the exam was not difficult enough. The fact that 10% failed the exam may indicate otherwise but this is of course something that could be discussed.

3. Indications of high quality

The students had high expectations towards the course – and even if the expectations were only partly met, most students found the course useful. The lectures and the reading list seemed to be what the students were most content with.

Providing an introductory course for students that did not have the recommended background in methodology made it possible to let the course be an advanced course in methodology as we could expect that all students knew the basic issues before starting the course. It is important to continue providing such an introductory seminar.

The mix between a school exam and a portfolio assignment worked well. The portfolio assignment made it possible for students who had good knowledge of methodology to use this in a constructive manner, whereas students who did not master the course well had difficulties. This was an intended effect.

The seminar leader that led the work groups was highly qualified (PhD). This was a big asset in a quite difficult course that aimed to give the students a broad overview of many methodologies.

4. Indications of low quality

The students were least content with the work groups. This does, however, not necessarily mean that the quality was low. Developing good work groups/seminars for students with very different expectations to what work in a work group should be is a challenge. As discussed above, suggestions for future courses is to make the purpose of the work groups clearer and also to shift the focus a bit so that the groups focus more on issues from the lectures and reading list.

5. Development of study quality

The course was given for the first time. In order to work on improving study quality through the semester, we had extra evaluations of the course. The introductory and mid-term evaluation gave important information for developing the course. For example, the information that having the course in English was considered a challenge by a large minority of the students was useful to focus more on explaining some concepts. The information from the mid-term evaluation about the seminars was useful in order to adjust these.

6. Suggestions for improvements

The purpose of the work groups should be made clearer at the beginning of the course. The work groups should also change focus a bit so that they focus somewhat more on issues and concepts from the lectures and reading list. A 50/50 ratio between discussion of issues and concepts from the lectures and reading list – and on the portfolio assignment – would be a good balance.

The reading list should be reviewed and necessary changes made. Some suggestions are mentioned under the heading “reading list” above.

The language issue is a serious one. It is important that concepts are explained well so that all students understand them. It could be considered to separate the work groups so that one of them is in Norwegian only and the other is in English.

Attachment 1 Expectations MEVIT Spring 2009 - results

In general

How useful do you expect this course to be for you?

15 Very useful **17** useful **1** not very useful **2** waste of time

Background

What background in methodology do you have?

2 Methodology in MEVIT1310 **9** MEVIT2800 **9** No background

15 Other (.....)

Language

What do you think about having this course in English

10 Good, I don't speak Norwegian

16 Good, I speak Norwegian, but my English is good enough

9 Challenging

Attachment 2 Final evaluation - results

How useful has this course been to you?

Very useful	3	11.1%
Useful	17	63.0%
Not useful	7	25.9%
Waste of time	0	0.0%

How useful have the lectures been?

Very useful	1	3.7%
Useful	17	63.0%
Not useful	8	29.6%
Have not been participated	1	3.7%

How useful have the seminars/working groups been?

Very useful	0	0.0%
Useful	5	18.5%
Not useful	16	59.3%
Don't know/Have not participated	6	22.2%

How useful has the literature on the reading list been?

Very useful	2	7.1%
Useful	20	71.4%
Not useful	5	17.9%
Don't know/Have not read much	1	3.6%

How challenging has it been that this course has been held in English?

Very challenging - it has made it a lot more difficult	4	15.4%
Challenging - but it went ok	8	30.8%
No problem - I speak Norwegian, but my English is good enough	6	23.1%
No problem - I don't speak Norwegian anyway	8	30.8%