

Periodic Course Report SOSANT2000.

The purpose of the course is to give an overview of anthropological theory and its contemporary importance. The needs that it seeks to address are twofold: First to provide an overview of key debates in anthropological theory in a manner that builds upon knowledge from previous courses (particularly sosant 1300, sosant 1200 and sosant 1090) and deepens students' understanding of and ability to use anthropological theories to address a variety of topics. Secondly to demonstrate the continued relevance of these theoretical discussions to our understanding of contemporary issues of public concern and political importance. In so doing the course aims to act as a bridge towards further specialisation such as the Bachelor Essay or further postgraduate research.

The course has been totally redesigned with a new syllabus and teaching style this semester. In the course of the redesign, in particular the new structure of lectures and reading list, as the member of staff responsible, I discussed with a number of colleagues, including all 3 members of the teaching team. This redesign is part of our attempt to improve the nature of undergraduate teaching at the Department in order to increase student engagement with our course, and we hope that it will be seen as a part of that process. In redesigning the course, I was guided as far as possible by discussions with students. I conducted focus groups with students who have taken the course over the past three years and collected feedback on what they feel could be improved in this course – suggestions that have wider implications for our undergraduate teaching more generally. The main points and suggestions that came from these discussions are:

- The need for more of a 'red thread' or thematic links between the lectures in the course and between this course and the courses that precede it in semesters 1-3.
- As far as possible to introduce the importance of debates in anthropological theory from an exploration of different angles on 'real-life' cases rather than vice-versa.
- Flipping the style of teaching and evaluation to make it more discussion based and to provide greater opportunity for students to develop their skills in reading, writing and the *use rather than simply passive learning* of key contemporary anthropological concepts.

I address these issues as relevant in the course of this outline to demonstrate where they have guided the design of the course.

Content and Syllabus

Following focus groups with students, I drew up a list of topics that both addressed their interests and provided a context for the development of the use of contemporary anthropological theory. In pulling these concepts together I had two main concerns; first to ensure that there was a greater degree of continuity between lectures and across the course so that students felt an incremental increase in knowledge and secondly to ensure that the course provides students with an understanding of how to use contemporary anthropological concepts creatively to address a variety of different contemporary issues. As far as possible, the syllabus has been based upon the issues raised by students in these focus groups, using these as a basis to cover as wide a range of core contemporary anthropological debates as possible.

The readings have been selected with a number of other considerations in mind. As mentioned, students wanted to draw out the connections between lectures and themes to give the course greater continuity. I have therefore prioritized texts that speak across themes so that lessons from previous weeks can be built upon and students can begin to understand how different concepts can reframe debates that they had previously been exposed to in a different framing. For example, in lecture 6, the Povinelli article, despite being a little older than most of the other texts on the reading list, usefully shows how ontological debates about nature/culture are tied in with political economic discussions in other lectures to do with colonialism or the character of labour and subsequent lectures such as that which deals with reality/virtuality or fact/belief. In addition, the course takes into the account the stated desire by students to build more on previous courses in the syllabus; in particular *sosant 1300*, *sosant 1200* and *sosant 1090*. Some topics build upon themes touched upon in these earlier courses and develop them in more detail, for example, lecture 1 builds upon many of the themes developed in *sosant 1090*, and lecture 4 develops many of the themes in *sosant 1300*. As far as possible I have tried not to re-cover ground that is covered in these courses, but to use them as the basis of more in-depth exploration. With that in mind, I have avoided readings that are used in these courses that I would otherwise have used (e.g. Abu-Lughod *Writing Against Culture*), but the lecturer can refer back to such readings and briefly reintroduce them for thematic context in lectures and discussion. The readings have also been picked in a manner to ensure that other key themes or themes that emerged from discussion with students that are not allocated their own lecture, such as, labour, gender, or temporality/history are discussed as integral parts of the course development across lectures.

The structure of the reading list has been restructured in a manner that fits the new teaching style. Students have raised a number of concerns about how the lectures and readings go together in the conventional 3 readings per lecture style that characterizes most of our courses. Students have described this structure as tending to present a set of problems for lecturing that as teachers we tend to address in one of two ways. Either we lecture around the readings and give a lecture on the topic that draws on a large range of readings to contextualise the readings and rely on the seminars to address the specifics of the readings. Or we summarise the three readings bullet-point style in the lectures. The former is often unsatisfactory as the syllabus readings are not adequately addressed and students worry that this is what they will be tested on in examinations. The latter often fails to address topics of key importance that need wider contextualization. To adequately address different anthropological perspectives on a key issue such as 'class' or 'nature' one might have to draw on a wider set of influences. The new reading list is expanded to make this possible but in a manner that does not add to the number of pages of reading that students need to complete to do well in the course. Each week the lecturer gives 45-minute presentation that gives an outline of the main anthropological perspectives on a particular theme that references and contextualises the readings for that week. When it comes to writing a final position paper for assessment, students can draw on readings from across the course, including those that they have prepared for presentation in class.

The reading list is therefore subdivided into two core texts per week and then 3-4 supplementary texts. The core texts provide the basis for the 45-minute lecture outlining

the topic and are used as the framework to bring in other texts. The supplementary texts are the basis for the group presentation and class discussions for at the start of the following week. In terms of page numbers, the length of the 'core readings' is significantly less than previous reading lists and the recommended limit for a ten-credit course. Students will be expected to show evidence of reading from the core-readings and supplementary readings in their assessed work, although they are not expected to have read the entire supplementary list, but to have selected from that list where relevant for their examination topic. In addition, the lecturer can provide additional readings on canvas on the different topics that they can draw upon for their examination papers. This means that the amount of reading expected from students remains constant but with greater flexibility to explore particular themes and topics in depth. The full reading list is attached as an appendix to this document.

Teaching.

The course is designed using a 'flipped class room' style. The course does not require extra reading from students in terms of page numbers, but it does require greater involvement from both students and teachers in the course of the twelve weeks. This is in response to student requests for more practice with reading, writing and presentation skills. A more active and engaged style of learning is designed to increase students' ability to understand and to *use* concepts creatively. This prepares them better for future tasks such as the Bachelors Essay or enrollment on our Masters Programme. It also provides them with experience in skills that will be important to demonstrate upon entering the job market after their studies, thus improving their confidence and employability. Presentations were not compulsory but it was made clear to the students that participation was expected and that those who participated would be likely to get more from the course. The majority of students did participate in one way or another.

Lecture 1 provides an overview of how the course is structured and taught and establish the mutual expectations that teachers and students can have of each other if students are to gain the maximum benefit from the course. In the second half of each lecture, a brief overview of the main themes of the topic is presented by the lecturer. This is supplemented by two forms of active student participation. Following the lecture, readings on the expanded reading list are divided amongst the students who are expected to read a text or section of a key text and to prepare a short summary of it in relation to the key themes of the text each following week. The lecturer provides guidance as to what sections of the text to focus on and what concepts and questions to draw out of the reading. Secondly, from week two onwards the 2-hour lecture spot will be divided into two sections. In the first half, students take turns to present and discuss each other's' summaries of those readings that were introduced the previous week. In the second half, the lecturer moves on to the next topic, again providing an overview of key themes and what to draw out of the texts under consideration for the following week's presentations. This means that each topic is spread over two weeks. The idea is that this gives the chance for the lecturer to give some guidance as to what to look for in the texts and the particular themes to draw out when preparing for presentation. This is in response to student feedback and is intended to help them learn how to look for the key points in academic texts and to give some structure and confidence prior to in-class presentations. Students are divided into small groups in week one and are

allocated readings to present in one of the following weeks. This means that all students will be involved in one presentation and that they will have to meet once during the course in the week leading up to their presentation. It also means that they can divide actual presentation duties amongst themselves or present jointly thus sharing the burden for those less confident about or experienced in public presentation. The final lecture is reserved for an overview of the course as a whole, drawing out how the themes of the previous 11 lectures tie together and to prepare students for how approach the assessment.

There are 7 seminars for the course. The seminars are structured around discussion of the theoretical approaches in the light of contemporary issues. The group focuses on how short non-academic documents; perhaps a newspaper article, a piece of fiction or film etc. relate to the current week's lecture topic and how it might be approached from different theoretical perspectives. Students will be encouraged to bring their own examples to class and each week the lecturer will bring 2-3 examples. For example, newspaper articles such as these

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/10/autonomous-drones-that-kill-britain-funds-research>

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/nov/11/alarm-over-talks-to-implant-uk-employees-with-microchips>

are used as a basis for a discussion of the theoretical approaches to human agency, culture and technology discussed in lecture 8. Other examples can be brought from Norwegian or international media.

The aim is to give students an increased sense of how to apply contemporary anthropological concepts to a wide variety of social issues, thus preparing them for the task of *using* these concepts creatively in developing their own projects at Bachelor Essay or Masters level; a stated purpose of the course.

The course involved 12 lectures of 2 hours and each student had the opportunity to be present at 7 seminars of 2 hours. In reality this course took a far larger number of hours in terms of teaching given the intensive nature of active learning on the course. Active learning by students requires far more active participation and guidance from teachers. For example, I spent many more hours in individual meetings with students, looking for guidance on their class presentations, than I would in a normal course. This is a good thing – it's precisely the kind of engagement that we should want to have with students and I have no doubt that it will pay dividends in terms of student understanding and student retention in the 3rd year and for the Masters Programme, but the reality that doing this kind of student-centred teaching takes far more than the credited hours should be recognized.

Resources and Infrastructure

We had an adequate lecture theatre and seminar rooms. On a few occasions the recording device in the lecture theatre did not work properly so we did not have recordings of the lecture.

Assessment and evaluation

Assesment for this course is by school exam. We are reviewing this after the first year of the course and intend to move forward to new forms of examination in future years (see below). This is evaluated in the usual manner.

Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes are broadly adequate in describing what the students are expected to have learnt after the exam.

How the course works

In my opinion the new course has worked very well overall. It is an experiment in a new form of learning and is bound not to be perfect in every respect and I plan to make some adjustments to it (see below). In terms of its main aims, to increase student engagement and to begin the process of encouraging students to engage in more creative thinking and the creative use of anthropological concepts to develop their own interests, it has been a success. The statistics seem to bear out that the course has been successful in engaging students' attention and developing their capacities. Of 70 students registered for the course, 60 took the exam and 2 were ill, meaning that only 8 did not take the exam. Of those who did take the course, the marks were as follows; 17% A, 47% B, 30% C, 5% D and 2% E. The lesson that I suggest that we take from this is that courses that push students a little harder can be both popular and pedagogically useful, provided that they are framed in a manner to engage with students' own interests and are designed to develop their capacity to learn.

Student feedback has been very positive. We conducted a focus group with students with the aim of getting both feedback and suggestions from a student perspective on how the course could be changed in future years to improve it. The overall feedback from students was extremely positive. A typical comment was 'I enjoyed this course a lot and never felt like I was lagging behind because it was very engaging... my classmates and I think it's been our favourite course this semester/year.' That being said, this student drew attention to aspects of the course that could be improved upon and I address our response to this below.

Other aspects of the course seem to work adequately. The course description works well although it might be useful to have more detail on the different nature of teaching, evaluation and expected student participation on the course description on the webpage. I believe that the course is correctly placed in terms of its level/semester. It is a challenging course but the majority of students reported that they enjoyed being pushed to achieve more and it is also the case that they need better preparation with regards to creatively using anthropological concepts before the Bachelor's Essay in the 3rd year, when many students report feeling lost and unsure about how to proceed. Many students who took this course have already reported to me that they feel more confident about taking the Bachelor's Essay now and coming out of the course the students asked me and Jon Henrik Remme, as head of undergraduate teaching to organize a meeting building on this course as

a bridge between the 2000 course and what they might hope to write on in their 3rd year. The course is correctly positioned with regard to recommended prerequisites.

Changes since the last evaluation.

Major changes have been made since the last evaluation and these are detailed above.

Suggestions for Improvement.

Following discussions with students, we have identified the following areas as potential areas for improvement.

Group Presentations:

Issues raised: There was a broad feeling that the group presentations were useful and that students wanted and needed more practice with presentation work. However, there were some who felt that it did not work so well to have the presentations in the lecture and that this took away from lecture time. There was a general sense that it might be better to move the presentations into the seminars, as this would be less daunting and there would be more chance for immediate feedback from the lecturer and from other students. People felt that it was particularly valuable to have the opportunity to get feedback that was not directly related to evaluation as a part of genuine learning. Other students cautioned that the seminars worked well as they are and asked not to change them too much. It was also stated that the work of helping students with presentations should not simply be left to this course but should be spread throughout courses across the undergraduate programme.

Although over half of students took part in the group presentations in one form or other, concern was raised that some students did not and there was a feeling that it should be compulsory to take part in at least one presentation. For those who could not be present in person it was suggested that they could upload a video presentation on canvas.

Also, some students felt that it would be important to give some brief guidance on how to prepare. I have run some voluntary seminars on how to read academic texts and how to write academic papers with first year students and these were pointed to as useful in terms of giving structure and reassurance. It was suggested however that activities such as these should be integrated into course design as far as possible rather than being additional activities.

Possible Actions – To move the presentations to the seminars whilst ensuring that time is kept for the discussions of topical events that also worked well. For the lecturer to incorporate some guidance as to how to prepare presentations into the introductory lecture and to make some resources available on canvas. To explore the possibility of making at least one presentation compulsory on a pass/fail basis, in which having presented in some form is adequate for a 'pass' as a compulsory component of the course. To explore incorporating these moves in other courses across the undergraduate programme.

Evaluation:

Issues raised: Students liked the way in which the more open-ended exam question gave them the opportunity to develop their own interests and ideas. They also felt that it tested what an evaluation should test; namely critical thinking using knowledge gained, rather than mechanical knowledge retention and recall. This led to some discussion as to the relative benefits of home exam versus school exam. Some felt that a home exam would be preferable, particularly for this kind of course. Others felt that school exams had an advantage of being more time-limited but there was the problem that they test memorization skills as much as they test the ability to work with knowledge. One suggested solution would be a school exam with access to course materials and internet.

Possible actions – to discuss with the undergraduate teaching team before the autumn deadline, changes to evaluation, including exploring the possibility of a school exam with access to materials.

Teaching

Issues raised: Students were broadly enthusiastic about the lectures and the teaching on the course. They suggested that more time could be devoted to the lectures and presentations could be moved to the seminars. They found the lectures very engaging when they were present but not so useful to follow when they listened to recordings. They found the summary documents of key texts that the lecturer prepared for some weeks very useful as a means of providing a foothold on the key concepts in the course.

Possible actions: To move presentations to the seminars (see above). To provide additional resources such as the summary documents of key texts.

Content

Issues raised: Students were broadly positive about the course content and structure, describing it as well put together, interesting, relevant and contemporary. They particularly liked the issues of 'cultural appropriation' and 'infrastructure'. One suggested that we could include something on 'climate and sustainability'. There was some discussion that 'globalisation' seemed like an old-fashioned framing but that the texts and issues raised were useful and important.

Possible actions: To review the texts to see if there are one or two that could be changed. To see if there is the possibility for including something on 'climate' without altering the overall coherence of the course. To reframe the 'globalisation' lecture as 'global culture', thus tying the lecture in more clearly with the preceding lectures on 'culture and society' and 'cultural appropriation'.

Other issues

Issue raised: It was stated that the course had been very successful in its aims of getting students to learn how to think creatively with anthropological concepts and that it was important to build on that momentum going into the third year, with activities such as the

meeting that was organized to prepare students for the Bachelor's Essay that we held this semester.

Possible actions: To continue with such meetings and to explore the possibility of incorporating them more into the curriculum.