Summary of course evaluation for SOS2920, Spring 2022

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Dear Students,

This is just a short overview over what we (Manjana and Bjørn) take to be the most important findings from the evaluation of SOS2920. The evaluation consists of 13 filled out questionnaires.

As is common with course evaluations, there are a number of findings that point in different directions. However, the overall tone to the evaluation is (moderately) positive. Especially the lectures have been well received. This confirms our own assessment of how the course has developed. The ambience during lectures and discussions and the relations between teachers and students have been good.

The evaluation also corresponds pretty well with our own assessments as to the course's weaker sides. We concentrate here on three weak points.
> 1) Group work has not worked optimally,
> 2) the exam tasks and paper have not been sufficiently developed, and
> 3) There is a gap between the rather abstract lectures and the practical introductory work with the software tools in question – there was not enough time to practice tool use during class time with the support of instructors.

1) The group format has not worked optimally. We understand this. There are a number of reasons for this, and not all of these can be addressed by the instructors. Some of the challenges have to with a lack of preparation or engagement from the student side, others are of a technical nature (e.g., the limitations of Canvas), yet others are linked to administrative rules, which constrain our ability to facilitate group formation and support. The following comment is representative, we think:

> [1] "I expected a really fun course, but it was not interactive enough. I thought we where doing sprints? Groups didn't really work… No one read. Don't know anything about the exam and it is nerve wracking. Much to read- but great when we went through some articles in the class" [2] "I find it difficult to pay attention, especially when we are working on the details with the different platforms."

In the future, we hope to improve this by creating groups later in the semester when it has become clearer how many of the registered students actively engage in the class.

The students also regret the lack of seminars, but the institute does simply not have the sufficient means to provide seminars for bachelor courses. However, given the absence of seminars and the importance of simple "familiarization" work with the software tools introduced on the course, group work (combined with instructional videos) still seems to us to be a fruitful or maybe only solution. We could consider an obligatory group assignment in the middle of the semester to ensure that the students really settle in in their groups. The course responsibles also hope that the students will be better able to judge the possible benefits of group work after the exam.

2) Understandably, students have been concerned about the lack of clarity about the exam and our expectations to the (composition of the) final student paper. The following comment is representative:

[2] "There is a wish for earlier technical description of the exam paper from the start. This would aid the students/myself in preparing for what's to come, and to gain a deeper understanding of the end ''goal''. I would like to know more about the style the paper should be written in, the different parts of the paper that are required/expected to be produced by the group. This would push me more to dive deeper into specific areas of the material and lectures provided. As it is now, all that is done is to follow the lectures and to scroll through the reading material. the information given was good, it is not feel sufficient."

We completely understand these frustrations, which are to some extent related to the fact that this is the first time this course is being taught, and that we are not able to provide examples from past exams. Next year, we will be in a better position, since prospective students will have access to this year's student papers. In addition, we believe that we have already helped address some of these concerns over the last two weeks of the course, including a discussion of exam expectations during the last lecture and a consultative process for developing the exam projects during the workshop day, when the instructors provided specific guidance and advice to each group. We have also developed an exam guide that contains a sample paper structure.

Next year, we will do our utmost to provide more detailed information regarding the student papers throughout the course, helping students understand better how they might use or apply a certain tool or lesson in their exam project.

3) Some of the students remark on the distance between rather abstract (and sometimes rather theoretical) texts at the base of the lectures and the more practical or hands-on work with becoming acquainted with the actual tools. The following remark is illustrative:

3] "The sylabus focuses on cases where the method is used. Before that a better understanding of how the methods work would be necessary in order to take something out of the examples in the sylabus. The readings did not help to understand the method itself which is the point of the course"

We believe that this statement reflects the challenges of this particular class: the need to understand (learn about) a number of theories and concepts about the nature of digital methods in order to be able to use digital methods. While we recognize that more time to deal with the 'how' of the methods is desirable, the solution is not to abandon the theoretical readings. We attempted to strike this balance between theory and methods in the following ways:

- within the pensum we combined conceptual and methods-focused readings. Many of the readings actually demonstrate the use of the methods we introduce in class; they are applications that should help students understand how the tools can be deployed, what kinds of questions can be answered with them, what an analysis looks like etc.
- by combining lecturing and in-class exercises,
- by assigning 'video homework' – instructional videos on the practical and hands-on issues of tool use, either by an instructor or available online.
- By encouraging student groups to meet outside of class to practice the use of tools together.

Hence, we relied to some extent on students taking the time to learn about tool mechanics outside of class, which might have been too high an expectation for an undergraduate course.

In the future and absent the possibility of seminars, we might change this balance by reducing the number of tools we introduce in the course in order to make more time for in-class tool practice.