

LATAM 4550

Tendenser i forskningen om Latin-Amerika, Høst 2012

Background

This is the third year the course has been offered. In 2010 it consisted of (only) five meetings where theoretical, methodological and ideological issues were addressed. During 2011 the number of classes was increased to 10. Basically the same course was offered, but this time the theoretical discussion was complemented with the reading of 5 master theses produced/submitted at from different UiO departments. We assessed their merits, learn about their scope, methodology, epistemology, the way it related to some of the theoretical questions, and so forth. During 2012 the syllabus was reorganized, it became more specific, some texts were dropped (especially those heavily relying on International Relations) and some added. During the second part more than five theses were offered and the students were able to choose what to read from a fix set of possibilities.

This was and still is an experimental course. It combines traditional lecturing with thesis reading and reporting, while the students advance in their own writing progress towards a viable thesis proposal.

I chose to create a shared blog in tumblr.com to post academic and journalistic articles related to the course at large as well as themes treated from week to week. This was in part as an extension of the class beyond the class, and as an answer to the inaccurate functioning of fronter at the beginning of the semester. In the end we use both: Fronter for official communications, dates and grading, and the blog/site for relevant content. This is how the blog/site was used: when reading Mignolo's book, for instance, I posted on the blog/site a series of papers and interviews by or about Mignolo. This site was used to build links towards different institutions and programs (ASA, LASA, Flacso, Clacso) relevant to the course goals and the student interests. Students were invited and encouraged to upload suggestions links and comments.

Attendance and participation:

6 or 7 students showed up the first day, four remained and finished. Two got and A and two a B.

Comments on student performance:

The group was very small so I was able to get to know their work and understand their interests. I noticed that the four had very dissimilar experiences, education, and expectation. I am under the impression that Mignolo's book was well read, but in the rest of the theoretical classes some of them came with a summary reading if that at all to class. The reading and assessment of the 5 thesis was very satisfactory, they engaged in the common discussion and were able to discuss their own project in relation to the readings and the other students interests.

The level of participation outside of class, site/blog and fronter- was negligible, ins spite of the fact that I constantly reminded them via mail and presence of this fact.

Student evaluation questionnaire:

- The student evaluations are mediocre, and good. The sample -three cases- almost coincides with the universe -four registered students. In any case the number is small.
- Students tended to agree that some classes were unstructured, which is, to certain extent true, and that is something that I could have worked differently. I am also under the impression that some student were expecting more a pre-digested summary of the readings than a discussion that would have stemmed from those readings. I also found out that for the level in which they are working they lack some basic knowledge of latin american history, history of ideas, and basic awareness of macro theoretical lines of thought.
- The students agree that in this course they work equally if not more than for other courses.
- One was not engaged by my teachings, another one was neutral on the matter and a third seems 'particularly pleased' and engaged with my procedures. Again: the sample is to small to mark a trend.

Final Thoughts:

- The course needs a major revision. I would keep Mignolo, and Stolen text, and then revamp the rest of the bibliography to reflect the current development of research about Latin America, including also Latin American research made in, and by Latin Americans, Specially in a time where research is globalized.
- I would include more raw data on relevant international institutions, events, and organizations to give a sense of the 'field'.
- I would include more Latin American authors, and works that emphasized collaboration north/south.
- The five theses we read are from UiO, I would use some theses from other universities from around the world.
- I suggest that as a requirement of taking this course the students have a working knowledge of the main macro social theories (Marxism, Strcturalism, Funtionalism, Symbolic interactionism, for instance) , and some of their applications to a Latin American context (dependency theory, postcolonial and subaltern studies) and/or made sure that in the first two gatherings those general lines are covered.