

**Course evaluation report
NORAM1506
2015-II**

Background

NORAM1506 has been taught by David Mauk for many years and organized around his textbook, which focuses on American society and political and social institutions. We replaced that book and were unable to find a single text that fulfills all the objectives of the new course.

Objectives

There are a number of goals that we started the semester with.

1. We are trying to develop a course organized around ideas and themes, rather than information.
2. We are working with a mandate from the American Studies program to incorporate US History into the course because NORAM 1500 has been eliminated.
3. We are trying to begin the process of shifting American historical studies to reflect the study of American politics and the history of ideas, as well as social history.
4. We wish to include a component of cultural history especially as it engages political history.
5. We would like students to be familiar with a set of “classic” texts in American politics and American thought.

The course is not meant to be limited to a single academic field, but is interdisciplinary by design.

The purpose of the course is to open up an understanding of American culture from the perspective of assumptions, ideas and institutions. Methodologically the point is to avoid the kind of narrow academic enterprise that we see so much of today. The idea of interdisciplinarity is to see the social-cultural sphere as an intricate web that connects practices, beliefs and values. We try to represent rhetorical and cultural discourses and traditions – ways of seeing, thinking and acting that are specific to the U.S., (though not unknown elsewhere). Themes are important to the course, in this case there were two major themes: the conflict between the old republican America and capitalist America in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the conflict between proliferating subjectivities that came with social liberalization after WW2 and the developing crisis of economic inequality of our time. These are not easy questions, but they are the most relevant ones in my judgment.

Issues

Some students seemed perplexed by the course. This is partly due to the fact that the course description had not been revised. We could have also been more proactive in explaining the exam and properly introducing the course.

Some of the confusion must be laid on students themselves, or on the lack of a proper orientation to the university. Where students should get the idea that a university lecture amounts to a review of reading material, I don't know. But it's not going to happen: not on my watch. Having a university student write in an evaluation that he doesn't know "what to think" because the lecturer and the instructor have different perspectives reveals a deep confusion about education.

Having said that, there were real structural problems with the course. The first problem is the lack of teaching time. Certainly the course could benefit from a 50% increase from 2 to 3 hours per week. I cannot count how many students approached me to ask for longer lectures. We will leave that as it is, but it should be pointed out that we are trying to cover the same material we did in the old grunnfag course in exactly half the time.

The second problem was that lack of a proper design for the course – specifically the relation between the texts, the lectures and the exam must be clarified. I don't blame the students for being confused there, though again a commonplace is or has been that lectures introduce themes that help to guide students' reading; and both lectures and readings constitute the basis for an examination. However, this was never explicitly stated. It is also true that some of the secondary reading material was pretty far from the course themes and there were not enough appropriate secondary materials in general; some of those texts were part of the class reader (electronic) and I don't think students realized that. The primary readings (also part of the electronic class reader) were not edited as well as they should have been and they lacked introductions to explain the texts.

Results

It should be noted that despite all the complaining on the part of students, there were really very few complaints about grades. Furthermore, the grade distribution pattern is not that far off a classic "bell curve." Many students did very well on the exam. They must have learned something.

Remedies

Lectures must be recorded. Many students work and cannot attend lectures. I found this in many evaluations.

The course title and description must be changed.

The lecturer must address the character and goals of interdisciplinary studies in the first lecture.

The reading material must be changed. I am proposing to replace the present textbook with 3-4 short thematic books on culture, politics and society.

Exams should be based on the books explicitly and formulaically – that is each exam question will quote a specific text and ask for clarification, perhaps in reference to defined course themes. Short answers will be based on primary readings, which will be reduced in extent and number and given written introductions.

Solutions

The course will always be stressed by having to serve too many different constituencies, a problem now exacerbated by the closing of NORAM1500. An introductory course for American Studies should be considered.

Mark Luccarelli