ENG4118: Periodic report

Introduction

This is the first periodic evaluation of ENG4118, a course which first ran in spring 2016. The materials drawn on for this report include the following:

• The course description (reproduced below)

• The intended learning outcomes (reproduced below)

• Statistics on grades, students dropping out, complaints etc. (provided to me by Mia Brunelle Jønnum)

• Student feedback, both handwritten (which I elicited during the course by handing out evaluation forms), and statistical, in response to a questionnaire, (statistics provided to me by Mia Brunelle Jønnum)

• My experience of the course as course designer, lecturer and teacher

Course description for ENG 4118

Work in relevance theory attempts to understand and explain human communication as a facet of human cognition. This course sets out the basics of the theory, showing how it relates to (i) the ideas of the philosopher Paul Grice about speaker meaning and conversation, and (ii) modern linguistics and cognitive psychology.

The topics covered include the principles of relevance; sentence and utterance meaning; and implicatures and the distinction between explicit and implicit meaning. We will see how the theory provides insight into types of language use: for example literal and figurative use, including metaphor and irony.

Learning outcomes for ENG 4118

After completing this course you will

• have extensive knowledge of relevance theory's account of communication

• be familiar with the intellectual background of relevance theory, in particular Grice's work on meaning and on conversation

• have deep insight into the distinction between encoded meaning and what is communicated

• have deep insight into the explicit/implicit distinction in communication

• have extensive experience in analysing utterances in the terms of relevance theory

• know how to apply the concepts of the theory to various types of language use such as metaphor and irony

- be able to set out and discuss arguments and evidence for relevance theory's key claims

Summary

The course is good in several ways, but I think that in its first run it came out as slightly less than the sum of its parts. The curriculum is good, the textbook – Clark, B. (2013). *Relevance Theory*. Cambridge University Press – is good, the teaching was generally good (according to student feedback, as well as my own estimation), the discursive style of the course was appreciated by students, and the students' overall evaluation was that the course was excellent – both qualitatively and quantitatively: average of 9.2 answering 'On a scale from 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with the course?' But looking back on the course I feel that it was not as good as it could have been. I think that at the end of a course at this level on pragmatics, the students should be engaging with some of the recent, cutting-edge literature on the subject, and I'm not confident that in its first run, the course achieved this.

1. Assessment of curriculum (content, scope)

The content of the curriculum seems to me to be fine. I'm less sure about the way that the lectures divide it up. In this first run of the course, I was guided by the way that the textbook divides the subject into chapters, as well as by my own thoughts about the material to be covered, as a way of setting the divisions between lectures.

Teaching (teaching methods, number of hours, spread over the semester, compulsory activities, qualification tasks)

The teaching was conducted in ten two-hour sessions. This seemed to be a good amount of teaching, covering all the theory that I intended to, and allowing the students time to work on their portfolios in the middle of term and towards the end of the term. The first submissions of the work that would ultimately make up the portfolio were the qualifying tasks. This worked well.

The method for teaching was a mixture of an informal lecture with discussion questions, usually discussed first by the students in small groups and then subsequently by the whole class, as the students explained to each other and to me what they had discussed in their groups and what conclusions they had come to, if any. There was considerable enthusiasm for this method in the student evaluations. It was mentioned in all the evaluations. One student wrote: "I enjoyed the fact that the lecture was built as a discussion rather than a "listening to the professor & writing everything down, no questions asked". It was very interactive."

Another wrote: "I have enjoyed that we have switched between 'lecture

mode' group discussions and full-class discussions."

A third wrote: "The discussions have been very useful. The fact that we have been so few people have made the environment safe. It's always useful to listen to what you have to say about the topic after reading at home."

On the other hand, one wrote, "Maybe some more time on the exercises would help! Analysing more examples is always helpful for students because we get to think about what we are just taught and also get our classmates' aspects [sic] on the topic!"

And another wrote: "The class discussions were not so lively/active, but teacher did well in stimulating them".

There was only one further complaint about an aspect of the classroom teaching in the student evaluations. One student noted (as a negative factor in her own efforts) "the early hour of the class! I think 10-12 or 12-14 is the better to be taught a more philosophically oriented linguistic course." (The class was timetabled from 8.15-10am.)

Only one of the students commented on the textbook, writing: "I think the book is sometimes confusing. I remember chapters that you could clearly summarise in one or two sentences. The methods and the exercises are useful and relevant." I think that this is an astute (if partial) assessment of the textbook.

Resources and infrastructure (classrooms, audio-visual aids, library resources and others)

The classroom was one of the ground-floor classrooms in PAM hus, equipped with a projector (which we didn't use) and a whiteboard, (which we did). It was fine for our purposes.

Examination (examination system, evaluation form).

The final assessment was by portfolio, where each student's portfolio consists of two pieces of written work of 4-6 pages each. Each piece was submitted as a draft and returned to the student with comments so the students had the opportunity to revise the work before the final submission. This was (in my view) an excellent method of assessment. My experience with this system in the first run of the course confirmed my prior view that the students would need considerable guidance on the form and content of even such short pieces of academic work, and the way that the assessment process was structured allowed me to provide this to them.

One of the students wrote: "I believe that the way that we are assessed us very efficient and motivating (draft - comments etc)."

2. Are the learning outcomes a good description of what students should be able to do after your exams?

I think the learning outcomes are an excellent description of what the students should be able to do, except that if were writing them now I would add "students will be able to engage with up-to-date scholarship on relevance theory". That is, towards the end of a course at MA level on pragmatics, the students should be critically reading some of the recent, cutting-edge literature on the subject. In a way, this is implied by the other learning outcomes: anyone who can do the other things on the list will also be able to do this.

I'm not sure how good the learning outcomes are as a description of what the students *are actually* able to do at the end of the course. One of them wrote on her evaluation form "I believe that I have learned a great deal but that I lack deep understanding (for example I would probably be in trouble if I had to explain the subject to someone else)." That is worrying, especially since I suspect that it is accurate.

3. Is the course description satisfactory? Check the following:

I think the course description is good. It is clear, concise and accurate.

- Statistics on grades, dropout rate and complaints.

There were six students who initially signed up for the course. Four students took the final assessment: two of them got 'B' grades, and one each got an A and a C. There are no complaints listed in the statistics I received.

- Feedback to teachers and administration.

In the evaluations I received from students, there were no complaints about the course description, the course content or the level of difficulty of the course.

- Feedback on the information / guidance students receive on the subject.

I'm not sure what information /guidance students received before the course except for the course description, but they seemed to feel that the course fitted their expectations. At any rate, there were no complaints about the course not doing so in their evaluations, nor to me verbally.

One student wrote: "To be honest, I was not particularly attracted to pragmatics and relevance theory before, but this has changed now."

Another wrote: "My goal was to get an introduction to relevance theory. I now know the basic assumptions of the theory and the course triggered

me to think about linguistic phenomena in a new way."

A third wrote: "I have enjoyed pragmatics in general! I really wanted to work with this different aspect of language and linguistic [sic] whose main aim is not to see what the words mean but how meaning is created. The implicated meanings are my favourite stuff to work on and know about, what people mean rather than what they say, or additionally to what they say."

- How well the course fits in the subject group it belongs to.

The course follows on from ENG2157/4157 very nicely. Together these courses take students from the very basics of thinking about linguistic meaning and language use through to expertise (of a necessarily limited scope) in one pragmatic theory. ENG4118 could also be useful to students of English literature, given the concern of many relevance theorists with literary language, which is explicitly included in the phenomena that the theory attempts to account for, in contrast to much other work in linguistic semantics and pragmatics.

- Whether the subject is properly positioned with respect to the level / Recommended semester.

Here I have some doubts. The course is an introduction to a subject and theory that students may not have studied before. The textbook is appropriate in that it is designed for an introductory course, but less so in being aimed more at undergraduates (although it is quite sophisticated and rich in detail). I think that the course should lean more towards looking at the primary literature - research papers - and rely less on secondary literature after the first few weeks.

- Whether the subject is correctly defined in terms of the recommended / required prerequisites.

No compulsory prerequisites were set, although it was noted that "It will be useful if students have taken ENG2152 - Varieties of English Texts, ENG4152 - Varieties of English Texts, ENG2157 - Semantics and Pragmatics, ENG4157 - Semantics and Pragmatics or an equivalent introductory course on semantics/pragmatics." I think that this is fine. The course does not presuppose any knowledge, but some previous experience in thinking about linguistic meaning and language use is certainly helpful. The ILN course LING1100, *Semantikk og pragmatikk 1*, could be added to the list, but it should be clear enough that it falls under the description "an equivalent introductory course on semantics/pragmatics."

4. Have you made any changes since the last periodic evaluation?

Which?

Not applicable: this is the first such evaluation.

5. Suggestions for improvement

In future runs of this course I intend to lean less heavily on the textbook, and to ask the students to spend more time on reading my lecture notes and research papers (from journals and edited collections).

I will change from using the textbook as the primary text throughout the course to using it as the primary text only early on in the course, and only as background reading later on in the course. Equally, instead of recommending several papers as background reading, I will set one paper (or sections from one paper) as the main reading for each lecture after the first few, introductory weeks,

I intend to encourage students to do more preparatory reading from the literature, and to make use of it by having students routinely present some of the main ideas of the reading and to ask questions based on the reading. So I will take up the suggestion made by one of the students that "there could have been some questions for discussion for us to prepare at home [in addition to the reading]".

I intend to cut down on the time which I spend talking to the group, so that more of the time is spent in groupwork, and class discussions.

All of this is aimed at the goal of getting the students to take more control of their learning so that by the end of the course they have achieved a certain amount of mastery of the subject (albeit necessarily limited, given that this may be their first course on pragmatics).

Nicholas Allott, 2nd November 2016