

ENG 4550: Theory and Method in North American Area Studies

After the deadlines for changing courses, I was asked by Tor Erik Johnsen if I could adjust this course to include the British Civilization MA students as a one-time thing because several BrCiv students could not study abroad. This is something I had suggested several times in the past as a way of rationalizing and making the BrCiv MA a possibility. Therefore, I talked with Atle Wold and we agreed to run this as a pilot project for a joint course. Unfortunately, because of the deadlines, I could not change pensum for the NORAM students and had to assign additional, different pensum for the BrCiv students. This meant that the two groups could not be fully joined. Atle and I co-taught two of the sections because of this additional reading. And I had to do additional prep for other reading of BrCiv theses to teach them myself.

The syllabus description given to the students along with the agenda follows.

***NEW THIS SEMESTER!***

North American Area Studies (NORAM) and British Civilisation / Area Studies will both be served by this course. This is a trial run that will potentially lead to a permanently integrated course. Because of this, there are changes to the published *pensum* that is listed online – for the BrCiv students. NORAM students are welcome to read additional items from the BrCiv list, but they are optional. The agenda within this document will specify which items are solely either NORAM or BrCiv. Any items which are not specified as such are intended for both groups of students.

Atle Wold and I are cooperating in revising this course to integrate BrCiv students. He will serve as advisor to the BrCiv thesis proposals, while I will advise all students (NORAM and BrCiv) on the *mappe*. Atle will serve as *medsensor* for the course. He and I may choose to flip roles in grading for the BrCiv students.

***Course content and Learning Outcomes: (as published for NORAM)***

This course is both theoretical and practical. There are two overarching goals in the course.

1. Prepare you for thesis work (practical and intellectual skills)
2. Help you think about your studies and your research in the context of American Studies as a field.

The course will give a relatively broad theoretical and methodological introduction to the field of North American Area Studies. We will discuss the concept of Area Studies and consider important and various influences—from

human geography to historiography and cultural studies—on the development of North American Studies as a field. Seminar classes discuss the following questions: What is the history of American Studies as an intellectual field? How is historiography shaped by considerations of audience? What is the culture concept and how have shifting interpretations of culture shaped American Studies? What is the role of historical and contemporary events in shaping Area Studies? What are the similarities and differences between Area Studies and Cultural Studies? Is American Exceptionalism still important in American historical and cultural studies?

The course will also provide practical training for writing a thesis in North American Area Studies. You will finish the course understanding what makes North American Studies a field and how to write a North American Studies thesis. You will also learn about sources and how to use them in research. In connection with these goals, students will read, analyze and prepare reports on sample UiO theses in North American Studies drawn from a range of issues and disciplines. The focus will be on the skills needed to construct a full and acceptable proposal for your thesis work, which will allow you to begin your thesis work following the course and will give you the tools needed to finish your thesis on time.

Upon completion of the course you will have:

- **Acquired the following skills necessary for writing your thesis. You will:**
  - Understand the differences between research and other forms of text writing
  - Know the difference between primary and secondary sources, and the ways each can be used in research
  - Learned how to find and assess the scholarly literature and debates on a topic
  - Have the ability to critically analyze academic arguments
  - Understand how to formulate fruitful problem statements and hypotheses.
  - Know how to apply proper scholarly ethics
  - Have learned a variety of ways to organize your own research
  - Understand the role of your advisor, as well as your rights and responsibilities in that relationship
  - Acquired the skills to write a project outline for your thesis
  - Acquire the skills to write a full prospectus for your thesis
- **Gained an understanding of the field of North American Area Studies. You will have:**
  - Acquired the skills necessary for understanding the epistemology of relevant academic models and theories in the social sciences and humanities.

- Learned how to see questions within the broader field of North American Studies.

***Adjustments for Course Content and Learning Outcomes: (BrCiv students)***

The practical work which prepares you for your thesis work is largely the same. The major adjustments will be that you will read articles about British historical traditions and cultural studies, rather than the articles on American Studies as a field.

- You will be introduced to the appropriate bibliographic database. Historical Abstracts works in the same way as America: History & Life.
- Although some of the readings seem to be on American Women's History, their purpose for this course is purely methodological. They will be as useful to you as they are to the NORAM students. In fact, NORAM students interested in political topics may find the subject matter of these articles as far from their interests as you do. Any topic would give the same results in terms of meeting the variety of interests in the class. The Welter article is an excellent example of how to structure an argument. Because it became a classic, other articles have overtly addressed her theories and offered updates. This opens up the historiographic process and illustrates how intellectual debates unfold. These skills are essential for any MA thesis – on any topic. It is these skills which will be learned through these articles. Neither BrCiv nor NORAM students are expected to reproduce arguments about American Women's history on the exam. The skills will be used to produce your own proposals.
- You will have the opportunity to read a couple of BrCiv theses, in place of a couple of NORAM theses.
- You will have separate readings on British historical traditions and British cultural studies.

Conflicts arose because the BrCiv students were angry about being put into a NORAM course. They resented having to read anything American – even if the purpose was purely methodological. Based on a meeting with the students, I am certain that the discontent expressed in the survey by a small number was based on this central conflict.

Solution:

Despite the problems in the pilot course, the joining together of NORAM and BrCiv MA students is realistic. The greatest problem came because of the very late decision to ask me to do that, which prevented me from fully integrating the two groups in their readings.

Next semester, it will be redesigned from the start to include readings from both fields for all students. I am taking the lead in this. However, Atle and I have had several talks about how to approach the theoretical aspects and what readings to use.

It is also possible that after this year, it will be replaced by a joint course for the thesis proposal with ENGLABS and a separate course on AmStudies/BrCiv Methodology. Parts of this course will go to each of the new courses. We will be able to expand the readings on theory considerably when the thesis proposal part of the course is moved to the other.