Report on SPR4104, spring 2013

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1. How did the teaching work?

   It was the first time I designed and taught a one-semester course on statistics for the humanities (better, for language and literature), although I had already taught, in cooperation with others, several statistical short introductory courses for linguists in the previous years.

   So, I doubt I provided the best course possible, since it requires some experience to understand the best way to teach and the best subjects to choose. Although I was very careful not to engage in too much mathematics, and one of my mantras was " there are always a lot of things one can argue about, statistics are not necessarily objective, and scholars on the field often do not agree", it may be that the course was too demanding after all.

   This may be due to two different things:

   First, the audience/ students were mainly PhD students or even higher: of the 10 who started, only 3 were MA students; of the 5 who finished the course, only one was a MA student. So this means that the level of the course, given the student mass, was actually a PhD course and not an MA one, although I tried to create an exam at a MA level.

   Second, I may have chosen a too difficult textbook, Baayen (2008). It was the best and more complete of the three I could have chosen (in my opinion), the other two being Gries and Johnson, but it was also the most difficult of the three, and I ended up by not following it at all – just pointing to the sections, chapter or exercises which were relevant.

   The course in fact taught three subjects: statistics proper, R (a computational environment for doing statistics), and the use of statistics in linguistics (through reading several relevant papers). Ideally, it would have a theoretical part, and a practical part where R would be drilled, but I was not allowed (because of my teaching hours) to teach further classes.

   I tried to compensate for this by requiring every week some exercises (which I would solve in the next class) and by asking for three qualification "oppgaver". But I had to give up the third one because it was too difficult for the students. In any case trying to solve it (and solving the two first ones) was instrumental in forcing them to work and study during the term.

   I also kept presenting new material and citing other texts, so that the whole course can be considered very broad, broader than usual introductory courses.

   The students were very interested and seemed to like the classes, and they seemed, in the oral "underveisevaluering", satisfied, although they may not have liked the exam.

   The exam was quite long so three (out of five) of the students were not able to answer all questions. I took that into consideration when giving them marks, in that I choose to be very lenient. Still, there was only one B, three C and one (very weak) E.

2. Gir læringsutbytteformuleringene i emnebeskrivelsen en god beskrivelse av hva studentene skal kunne etter avlagt eksamen?

   This is what stands in the webpage:

- *finne regelmessigheter i et stort materiale.*
- *studere sammenhenger mellom flere forhold.*
- *framstille mengder og tendenser grafisk.*
- *undersøke om kvantitative data er signifikante.*

Du kommer også til å lære om de språklige og litterære problemstillingene som disse metodene har blitt brukt på, som stil- og sjangeranalyse, leksikografi og korpusanalyse

I think it gives a fair description of what students may learn, although it is somehow too vague and in a way imprecise in that it cannot guarantee that a person who took the course can always find regularities in large materials (they learn some basic techniques on how to do it, but not even the prime experts can be said to always be able to do that!). Also, it is only an overview of some linguistic and literary problems, not necessarily all!

3. Fungerer emnebeskrivelsen tilfredsstillende?

Kort om emnet

Emnet gir en innføring i de statistiske metodene som har vært brukt i humanistiske sammenhenger. Du lærer å arbeide med programmeringsspråket R, slik at du kan utføre statistiske beregninger og vurdere statistikk på en kritisk måte.

Yes, this one is perfect.

4. Har du gjort noen endringer siden forrige periodiske evaluering? Hvilke?

This is the first time.

5. Suggestions for improvement

After having taught one semester, I have naturally many improvements to do. One could be a more clear program from the beginning, with specific questions per week so that students could have more control about what to study/drill. I have now a better insight on the kinds of exercises that could be interesting to them.

On the other hand, I suppose that my choice of teaching in Norwegian was probably a hinder instead of an advantage (in fact, two of the five students were foreigners), since when I taught two of the classes in English (due to the presence of Renata Tironi de Camargo, who was a Brazilian guest researcher at ILOS) it was equally productive.

The most important change, however, would be having a theory class, and a practical class, that is: three hours a week instead of two. That would allow more support from my side in using R and actually performing assignments.