

ITA 1501 – Italiensk kulturkunnskap

Course overview – module description

ITA1501 is geared towards first-year students of Italian who often have no previous knowledge of the subject and of the language. As such, it is a first, broad approach to Italian history from ancient Rome to the contemporary age with a special focus on the following periods: Renaissance, Risorgimento (the nineteenth century when unification of Italy took place), and the twentieth century (including: World War I and II, Fascism, Resistance, the post-war period and the economic miracle in the Sixties). While providing the students with all the necessary information on the main events and figures in Italian history, the course offers significant insights into major features of Italian culture. In particular, the following topics are explored and discussed in class: Dante and Petrarch as late medieval and early modern intellectuals; humanism, the education/university system in the early modern period and the discovery of classics; various definitions of the Renaissance, Renaissance art, Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the artists*; Renaissance politics and Machiavelli's *Prince*; life in Renaissance courts and Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier*; the 'questione della lingua' (which Italian dialect was to be used as a written language) in the fifteenth-century (Pietro Bembo, Trissino, etc.) and in the nineteenth-century (Manzoni, Ascoli); Italian cinema during and after Fascism (Neorealism and Federico Fellini).

Readings The reading list included a short introduction to Italian culture (Anna Cento Bull, *Modern Italy*) and two wide-ranging books exploring Italian history (Christopher Duggan, *A concise history of Italy*) and Italian politics (Elisabetta Cassina Wolff, *Italia's Politiske historie*). In addition, academic articles on specific topics were uploaded onto Fronter and primary texts in English translation ranging from the thirteenth to twentieth century were distributed in class.

Teaching The course consisted of 9 lectures and 5 seminars. Students had to pick a topic that particularly interested them and give a 10-minute presentation in class. Advice on possible topics and specific bibliography was provided to students in preparation for this.

Resources and infrastructure at the disposal of ITA1501 were adequate.

Examination Students received 9 questions and could choose two amongst them. They then had three days to submit their answers for a total of six pages.

Learning outcomes and assessment 34 students ended up taking the final exam, the average grade was B. Indeed quite a remarkable result. Both the co-examiner and I observed the high level of the students' answers. The students generally proved able to present and discuss two topics (plus one in the oral presentation) with clarity and coherence and with a good understanding of the main concepts and historical contexts. The use of secondary sources and bibliography could be improved but it should be noted that many students are taking only the one-year course in Italian and are not completing the Bachelor. Students' responses were generally very positive at the mid-point of the course, indicating that the topics were interesting and the professor was knowledgeable and engaging. Some students found the first part of the module (devoted to humanism and Renaissance) rather challenging but others thought it was the most fascinating of the whole course (it is no doubt a fundamental period of Italian culture for a number of reasons). The feedback received from the official questionnaires as well as the personal responses from the students were also very positive. Some suggestions were quite helpful and will be taken into account (see below suggestions for improvement).

Changes to previous ITA1501 courses Several major changes have been introduced. First of all, previous incarnations of ITA1501 mainly dealt with Italian history and politics but did not tackle cultural aspects such as art, philosophy, intellectual activities, and cinema. This was certainly a much-needed innovation and met the students' expectations; indeed all of them seemed to engage with all these facets of Italian culture. A further change was English as the language of teaching which was also embraced by all students enthusiastically. As a matter of fact, although they were given the possibility to write in Norwegian for their exams, the large majority of exams were written in English. Students proved to have an excellent command of both spoken and written English.

Suggestions for improvement The course was a bit of a 'work in progress' as I took up my position in August which coincided with the beginning of the lectures. Both the reading list and the type of exam had been decided before I was hired. Despite this, I managed to introduce significant changes in the programme and add quite a few specific articles and primary texts as suggested and compulsory readings. From the next academic year onwards, Duggan's and Cassina Wollf's books will be made compulsory readings while Bull's study will become an optional reading (most students did not find it particularly helpful). As a couple of students rightfully suggested, the detailed programme of the course will be made available in advance along with a comprehensive reading list for every lecture. Of course this was not possible last semester but it definitely helps students to have a clear sense of the course's progress especially if they miss one or more lectures. Furthermore, a list of

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relevant topics for the presentations will be given in advance so that the talks do not generally tackle Italian culture but engage with the course's programme and main topics. I shall think further about the best way to conduct seminars and will consider the possibility of splitting the class into two groups (around 35-40 students regularly attended the class). However, given the very positive feedback received from students, the topics and structure of the course will remain mostly unaltered.