

ENG331: Selected Topic in English Literature and/or Culture I

Course Report, Fall 2018

Course content and schedule

The course topic and content for this course are selected and designed by the instructor teaching the course in a given semester. The theme for this edition of the course was “The Literature of Ordinary Life”. The reading list consisted of a blend of poems, novellas, novels and non-fiction ranging from the late 18th to the mid-20th centuries (a 21st-century collection of poetry was scrapped from the curriculum because of time constraints), coupled with theoretical texts related to the overarching theme of the course, as well critical texts dealing with the authors or literary works assigned.

The “teaching” component of the course consisted of 8 seminar sessions of 90 minutes each, held on a quasi-weekly basis between mid-September and mid-November 2018. For each session the assigned reading consisted as a rule of one “primary” text and one accompanying piece of “secondary” material. Students received a set of preparatory questions or tasks one week in advance of each session.

The generality, inclusiveness—even “bagginess”—of the course topic actually corresponds to the specific theoretical problem that it takes up (the “ordinary” and the “everyday”). But I also wanted to make this 1st-semester master’s course an introduction to a variety of literary works, and critical themes and approaches, that might help students as they start thinking about topics for their master’s theses (some of the themes or approaches introduced include: Marxist criticism, feminism, Jacques Rancière, everyday life studies, temporality, plus the variety of literary genres, periods and styles).

Students

Of 17 registered students, 14 took the written exam (a 7-day home exam, counting for 2/3 of the course grade). All 14 passed the exam, but 13 came to the oral exam (remaining 1/3 of the grade), and the 13 passed. The distribution of final grades was as follows: A: 4, B: 5, C: 3, D: 1, E: 0. The average grade was thus: B.

Most of the students who took the exam had attended the seminars regularly. I would also note that this has been indeed—in my limited experience at least—a distinguished group of students. The high level of performance in the written and oral exams is but one token of this.

Teaching and learning approach

A somewhat experimental approach was developed for running this course and its seminars (the desire to document this explains the length of this report). The main idea was simply to hand over as much responsibility as possible to the students themselves.

A decision that seemed like a rather modest gesture, but turned out to shape the students’ experience and attitude to the course, was handing over the coordination of each seminar session to students themselves. During each 45-minute half of a seminar, a student was assigned as discussion leader. S/he would coordinate the discussion, ask follow-up questions, contribute her own reflections, make time management decisions, etc – I would raise my hand and wait my turn to speak like anyone else (my position as “teacher” gave me of course the power to interrupt, but I used it seldom). Discussion leaders were assigned randomly. At first I did this only at the start of each half-session. After some sessions, I started, following a

student's suggestion, to notify discussion leaders a few days ahead of the seminar, so that they get a chance to do extra preparation.

There was of course a strong expectation of preparation ahead of seminar sessions, and students fulfilled this expectation (even when partial preparation was openly acknowledged, as when students had a paper due for another course, there was still enough to go on for class discussions). Question sets were assigned a week ahead of each seminar to provide stimulus to students' reflections. The question sets were often detailed and layered, but students were told it is okay to focus on those questions that seemed most compelling to them. Sometimes the questions were meant to make a certain point or provide guidance through material that might seem somewhat obscure. As one student commented (I paraphrase): sometimes it is okay for questions to be "leading", if they lead you by steps to see a point clearly.

There was a process of growth and development in our seminar practice over the course of the semester. Discussions would sometimes become too "meandering", as some students put it, and would not yield clear takeaways. Based on mid-semester feedback (a feedback survey and two informal after-class group discussions) and my own in-class experience, I had to adapt my own approach and contribution. My role eventually crystallized around summarizing at opportune intervals key points raised thus far, or calling attention to comments that I found on-point or meriting further discussion—in addition to providing my own input into the conversation or answering questions put to me. This was appreciated by the students, some noting that it gave them useful validation of or feedback on their own contributions.

I daresay the students also needed to grow into this kind of practice, in terms of their individual skills as well as the group dynamic. Feedback in the end-of-course survey and informal comments indicated that the seminars improved over the semester, and students were appreciative of their role in shaping the course through their feedback as well as their in-class roles.

I was struck that during our mid-semester chats about how the course is going, many of the comments and suggestions for improvement were about what the students themselves could do differently, inside and outside of the classroom. I had started the semester by encouraging them to form study groups (facilitating this by setting up shell groups on the MittUiB online platform), and reminded them of this a few times. Students now suggested activating these groups to a greater extent and debated how best to use them, and the groups seemed really to take off from that point, as well student collaborations across the study groups. By the end of the semester, a strong sense of camaraderie had developed among this group of students, and perhaps the seminar style as well as the study groups played a role in encouraging this. In any case, this ought to reflect quite positively on the students' experience going forward, perhaps especially when working on their theses.

Student feedback

As mentioned above, student feedback was solicited mid-semester in the form of an anonymous survey, followed by two informal group discussions on the way the course is going. An end-of-semester survey was sent out by the administration. I have already gone over some of the feedback in the previous section. Here are additional points that are worth noting:

- Secondary texts: students seem particularly interested in secondary/critical texts. Some students referred to this element of the course when asked what was most conducive to their

learning. Others said they wished more time could be devoted to discussing these secondary/critical texts directly in class.

- In-class discussion in smaller groups and in plenum, based on assigned, specific (sub)topics, was also mentioned by a number of students as most conducive to learning, provided that the discussion does not become too aimless or fall into a long back-and-forth between a couple of students. (The group as a whole had to grow into this kind of practice over the course of the semester. The end-of-semester survey, as well as informal oral feedback after the end of the course, indicate that students were significantly more satisfied with the seminar style by the end of the semester, citing how it was adapted underway based on their feedback, dialogue between teacher and students, as well as their own individual and group practices inside and outside of the classroom)
- A couple of responses to the end-of-semester survey mention that it was not clear what the course goals and learning outcomes were. With a course topic of this generality, this is understandable, and more could perhaps be done to express clearly the potential takeaways from such a course. Other responses indicated that the course: • offered a “wide selection of literary works to engage with and consider for my thesis; • inspired an idea to “write a master[’s] thesis with a similar approach”; • offered “a good introduction to literary theory that I can use for my master’s thesis”; • “gave great insights into a genre and field of study that I have never considered before”, and “helped me with close reading and oral discussions”. These answers correspond well to the goals I had in mind for the course.
- Forms of teaching and assessment: students felt that more seminar sessions were needed to cover the material adequately. 4 out of 6 respondents to the end-of-semester survey also said they would have liked the course to include an optional written essay. 2 out of 6 chose lectures as a form of teaching that they missed (though it is unclear whether they mean full lectures in addition to seminars, or short lectures within each seminar).
- The highest satisfaction ratings in the end-of-course survey (4 “excellent”s and 2 “very good”s) were in response to “productive collaboration with your peers inside and outside of class”). This likewise fits with the rationale behind the approach taken.

Conclusions and overall assessment

- Course topic and readings: I feel that the course topic, despite its daunting generality, made for a successful course of its kind. Students became engaged in the overarching topic as well as the variety of ideas, approaches and literary texts that it allowed us to include. Critical texts were in general particularly appreciated, but some worked less than others and I would want to make changes to the readings in another iteration of this course.
- Approach to teaching and learning: I am overall quite satisfied with the results. Although the seminar sessions in the first half of the course varied somewhat in quality, the overall progress over the course of the semester is in itself a valuable learning process. Developments over the course of the semester tell me that students were not used to feeling so directly responsible, but were quite able to take on this mantle when given the space and impetus to do so. The gesture of handing over discussion leadership to students is truly a modest one, but it seemed to take on a symbolic meaning and shape the students’ perception of the entire course. The responsibility, independence and cooperation that the students actuated over the course of the semester will be an asset for them going forward in their graduate studies.

- Eight 90-minute sessions is far too little for a course at this level. The students and I felt we needed more time to deal with the material adequately, and additional sessions would have made it possible to devote the necessary time to address the critical texts directly, as many students felt was needed. More time would also have allowed the students and myself to better develop the group dynamics and practices (inside the classroom and without) needed for this style of seminar. The response cannot be to reduce to the amount of reading, which should correspond to the number of credits the course awards (10 ECTS). The students themselves did not find the readings excessive, and reducing the amount of material would impoverish the scope of course. It is rather the teaching that needs be extended. 3 or 4 added sessions would help a good deal.

- Assessment: exam performance was indeed impressive, and the external examiner had considerable praise for this group of students. This should be attributed to this potentially exceptional group of students' abilities and efforts, rather than to any quality of the teaching or the resources available. Notwithstanding the high marks awarded, I believe a supervised term paper would have been a more suitable exam form for a course of this nature than the 7-day home exam. This would better serve the function of exploring topics and approaches of potential interest for a thesis. While the essays produced constituted a good examination performance for its kind, a longer essay is both a better indication of the students' acquisitions in a course at this level, and a better learning opportunity. Students do not otherwise have opportunity and impetus to reflect on the course-topic in long-form writing over the course of the semester. Unsurprisingly they would have liked the option of getting feedback on a written essay during the course of the semester.