

Evaluation: HIS2335 *Into the Ice* Fall 2010 Prof. R.M.Friedman

This course suffered from a number of start-up problems, but nevertheless reveals promise for becoming a solid and popular course in the future. The course was not at first included in the initial listing of offerings for the fall 2010 semester. I elected a late start for the course, which resulted in some additional students. Nevertheless an enrollement of 13 students is disappointing, but given the start-up problems, this was certainly an advantage.

The course was designed for foreign students, but the vast majority who enrolled were Norwegian. The experience with foreign students reveals some of the problems in trying to cater to this group of potential clients.

I am especially disappointed with the first few weeks. In spite of the erratic quality of the lectures, one Norwegian student commented at the end of the course that in contrast to his professors in Samfunnsøkonomi, who put him and other students to sleep because of their boring style of lecturing, my presentations were almost always full of energy and engaging, even when I was not fully prepared. Other students stated that after some poor first lectures, marked by my uncertainty, I then began providing more solid offerings. They expressed appreciation of my aim not to repeat facts and details available in the readings, but to provoke the students to think thematically and critically about Norway as a “polar nation.”

A constant problem with the course is the inadequacies of the English language materials. *Into the Ice*, which is an abridged translation of the three volume *Norsk Polarhistorie*, is not well translated and not always as well edited as could be desired. I knew in advance that much of the additional literature I selected was either a bit too sophisticated or too elementary. And this indeed proved the case. I ended up spending much too much time early in the course on the late 19th and early 20th century heroic expeditions. But the syllabus literature simply did not convey essential information, such as comparing Amundsen and Scott’s preparations and expedition cultures – I then took an extra week to include several chapters from Roland Huntford’s popular book on Scott and Amundsen, which finally gave necessary flesh and blood to appreciate what set Amundsen’s expedition apart from others. Themes such as Norwegian Arctic imperialism, 1905-1945, and the postwar decline of Norwegian leadership in polar activities worked well, especially when the English texts are supplemented in lecture with more political background based on Norwegian sources. Introducing gender perspectives was valuable, but the readings were less than successful. Given the need for the course to provide basic history of polar topics – expeditions, industrial activity, social life in mining and whaling communities, polar politics, cultural politics of polar identity, and others – it is essential to find literature that works well both to convey information and to problematize the themes. Most literature is either factually very dry or thematically challenging, but assuming considerable prior knowledge. I will want to review of the literature and find replacement texts before the course is offered again. I have no doubt that a much stronger course can be developed based on Norwegian texts; if the enrollement of foreign students remains low, this might well be an option.

I accept and largely agree with the comments and evaluation from the three students who returned evaluation. I believe a more comprehensive return would probably confirm most of

their comments. (Although a few students who were especially in tune with the materials and lectures, who may not have been among those who returned evaluations, would probably have provided some additional positive comments.) The grades seemed to reflect that which I experienced in the classroom: a divergence of engagement with the materials and ability to understand as well as synthesize the various sub-topics. A: 2 students, B: 3 students, C: 2 students.

Communication and assistance from IAKH staff was largely positive, but one serious flaw resulted in a problem. When I asked to begin late, I was told that this would not be a problem. If necessary, I was told, a new room can be booked beyond the originally envisioned date for the last lecture. As this was my first time lecturing, I had no idea that a date for the final examination had already been fixed. Nobody thought to check to make sure there would not be a conflict. Much later it turned out that this date was so early that it meant losing a double-lecture. Even with a small class, it is not easy finding alternative dates at the last minute. I have now learned that all relevant information, including dates for examinations, are readily available on the website. It may seem obvious for those in-the-know, but for somebody who has not previously been involved with use of internet for organizing a bachelor's course and who was not explicitly introduced to these tools, it was all too easy to err. Now I know.