

Summary evaluation: JOUR4330 – Freedom of Expression

Spring, 2017

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Overall comments

The evaluations in the course are very positive – perhaps because out of ca. 12 students originally registered, only 5-7 actually attended with regularity, with 7 completing the mandatory qualification (an in-class presentation on a chosen case study); 6 submitted the required term paper.

The average grade in the course was a C.

Examples of student satisfaction with the course:

100% agreed that the teaching was engaging and well structured;

100% agreed that the teaching covered course content “very well”;

100% agreed that the exercises made them work actively with the course content.

With one exception (regarding forms of teaching in the course), 100% agreed that the information made available about the course was “good” (i.e., the highest possible mark of satisfaction in this schema).

This generally high level of satisfaction with the course is further expressed in detail in the qualitative comments.

Broadly, my “multi-media” approach to teaching – combining more formal lecture (designed to clarify, make important connections, and highlight important topics and questions for discussion), guided workshop/discussion sessions, use of white board to diagram and illustrate important concepts and conceptual interconnections, and conjoining digital presentation with printed texts – are all highlighted as primary points of what worked well.

Students generally agree that *the number and difficulty of the readings* is about right. There’s an occasional complaint about the difficulty, including the abstractness, of some of the articles – but to some degree, this is unavoidable insofar as freedom of expression ultimately rests on *philosophical* (indeed, sometimes *religiously-based*) arguments. In any event, compared to earlier iterations of the course, I can say that complaints about this dimension of the readings are greatly reduced, and perhaps at the minimum that one can hope for in such a course.

Of course, there’s always room for improvement, and the students made a number of helpful suggestions as well.

Some are minor but useful – e.g., in terms of making the focus of the lecture / day more explicit at the outset.

There is also the occasional wish for more contemporary examples. It is hard to know what to do here: there are also positive comments about the inclusion of contemporary examples in the course as it stands.

In all events, I will attend to these and other good suggestions in preparing for the next iteration of the course.

Particular comments about the course

As with its previous instantiations, *the course did not have an attendance requirement*. From my perspective – as well as at least one student, who mentioned this in the comments – this is something of a flaw. I was told that it was usual for students to disappear during the second half of the course as they would start to focus on their term paper. This appears to have been partially true.

Innovations.

Reading list/pensum: In response to student complaints about older readings as well as in an effort to keep the course fresh and current, I dropped an older reading (Lipschutz) and replaced it with a recent anthology from Ulla Carlsson (ed.), *Freedom of Expression and Media in Transition: Studies and Reflections in the Digital Age* (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2016). I also included occasional newspaper articles and references, e.g., from *Aftenposten*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and others.

Writing lab: students generally recognize that they need help with writing – and so in addition to making some resources available in the Fronter documents folder, I offered a writing lab towards the end of the semester. This was predicated on the assumption that the students would have a draft of their term paper to bring to class for peer-editing and further comment and development. As it turned out, only one student managed to do so.

This is a bit at odds with the evaluation response, **Question 11**, in which 40% agreed that “writing papers” was demanding but exciting – while 60% responded with “there could have been more of this”. That is, the offer / encouragement for more writing was there – but not responded to: yet a slight majority still wished for more.

It is also at odds with a particular critical comment, suggesting that “It would have been helpful to present a first draft of our term papers in class ...” Not sure what to make of this.

Reading – the technologies of literacy-print vis-à-vis digital screens.

I also followed through on my own observation that even at the MA level, students will generally try to read on screen only – leading to, as both my own observation and now a considerable body of research suggests, less comprehension and recollection in comparison with reading from paper. Instead of PowerPoints (except for the opening lecture), I instead provided notes and discussion questions in a Word document – displayed both on screen as part of my lecture, as well as made available to the students in print. The latter appears to have been especially helpful for the students’ discussion. (The Word document was also uploaded to Fronter for subsequent reference and use.)

Some of the positive student comments include appreciation for this aspect of the course as well.

Otherwise, I generally remained with my standard structure of ca. 45-50 minutes lecture/discussion, followed by 40-50 minutes workshop/discussion centering around

specific comments and discussion questions. This seemed to work well for most of the students most of the time – though one student wished for shorter class periods.

Evaluations:

While a midcourse evaluation was required, my request for administrative help in getting this done went awry (as sometimes happens: no criticism intended) and no midcourse evaluation was completed.

The final course evaluation took place at the close of the last class, May 2, 2017. Five students were present and submitted rather extensive evaluations.

Quantitative and qualitative evaluations

The following is a summary of (a) the primarily quantitative responses to the standard questions, and (b) the (qualitative) comments and responses to a series of final questions that I added to the evaluation form.

Quality of teaching

Both in quantitative and qualitative terms, the course evaluations were strongly positive regarding the teaching.

- 100% of respondents (5 of 5) fully agreed that the teaching was engaging;
- 100% fully agreed that the teaching was well structured;
- 80% (4 of 5) fully agreed that the teaching was clear and comprehensible – one partially agreed.

In response to question 2, “How would you say the teaching covered the course content?”

- 100% checked “very well” (i.e., the highest response)

Question 3 asks about whether parts of the course content should have been allotted more teaching hours:

- 60% said no
- 40% said yes, commenting (**question 4**):
 - current challenges from media discourses;
 - continue to use current examples / ongoing discussions to help understand theory, encourage debates in class

By contrast, in response to **question 5** – whether there were parts of course content that should have been allotted less teaching hours – 100% responded “no”

Question 7 asks about exercises assigned during the course – in this case, including an in-class presentation on a self-selected case study (either from print-based sources and/or from the Oxford University website on freedom of expression), but also, apparently, the discussion questions / workshops, given the high positive response to the second part of the question:

- 100% fully agreed that the exercises made them work actively with the course content;
- 80% fully agreed that the exercises made them work regularly with the course content – one partially agreeing.

Question 8 asks for an evaluation of the relationship between lectures and workshops/group-based teaching.

20% (1) responded with “very well”

80% (4) responded with “well”

Question 9 asks how much time students have put in to the course, including attending classes (the latter = 4 hours per week on average):

80% = 5-10 h/ week; 20% (1) 10-15h/ week in the first part of the semester;

60% = 5-10 h/ week; 40% (1) 10-15h/ week in the second part of the semester.

(FWIW: the U.S. standard – in the old days, at least – at the undergraduate level was that every hour of class required 2-3 hours of outside preparation. One would expect even higher amount of time for preparation at the MA level. If the student self-assessment of time spent is accurate, however, it would appear that the majority are not putting in 2-3 hours of preparation per one hour of class – i.e., 8-12 hours for 4 hours of class per week = 12-16 hours total per week. It would be helpful to know how these statistics compare with other MA-level courses.)

Question 10 also addresses time – this time, in terms of student self-perception.

Consistent with the above – comparatively low – preparation times,

40% of the students agree that they could have put in more time at the beginning of the semester;

this goes up to 60% agreeing they could have put more effort into the course during the semester, the remaining 40% partly agreeing (i.e. 0% disagreeing);

coupled with

80% partly agreeing they have been well prepared for class; 20% disagreeing – and 0% agreeing.

It may be that the class is somehow more demanding than others?

40% agree they have spent more time on this course than similar ones;

40% partly agree;

20% disagrees.

Question 11 asks about learning activities and their usefulness for student learning:

Reading the required readings

40% “too much time”; 60% “demanding but exciting”

Writing papers

40% “demanding but exciting”; 60% “could have been more of this”

(This is a bit odd in that it was clear from the outset that there would be only one written assignment – namely, the term paper; as noted above, I did offer a writing lab – but only one student out of the group had developed a draft in time to be useful for the lab. So I’m not sure how to interpret these responses.)

Attending lectures

20% thought this “demands too much time”, while 60% thought these were “demanding but exciting” – leaving 20% thinking there could have been more. A statistically normal bell curve, I suppose, where at least the majority are properly satisfied.

Attending workshops / discussions

60% agreed with “demanding but exciting,” while 40% wished there “could have been more of this”.

(no responses to “other”)

Question 12,

The course has taught me to analyze problems: 80% agree; 20% partly agree;

The course has taught me facts, ideas and methods: 80% agree; 20% partly agree;

The course has taught me practical skills: 40% agree, 40% partly agree; 20 % disagree – not too surprising, given that the course is not oriented towards conveying / practicing practical skills (apart from critical reading and writing).

Question 13, evaluation of “the forms of examination used in this course” –

Show acquired knowledge: 80% agree, 20% partly agree;

Show acquired skills: 60% agree, 40% partly agree;

Make me work regularly with the course during the semester: 40% agree, 40% partly agree, 20 % disagree.

This last comment is a bit puzzling and disturbing: if everything is oriented towards offering students resources for developing their term paper, I’m not sure why the readings, discussions, etc. would not being making them work regularly with the course through the semester?

Too much assessment in the course – 100% disagreed.

Question 14 asks about preferred assessment in the course – with quite an array of preferences:

Portfolio – 1

Written examination – 0

Semester paper – 3

Home exam – 2

Oral exam – 2

Oral presentation – 1

Question 15 asks about information provided in the course description. With one exception – “forms of teaching in the course” – there was 100% affirmation that the information made available was “good” (i.e., the best possible in this schema). The one exception – one student responded that the information for forms of teaching was “sufficient” – i.e., better than the last option of “poor.” So on balance, this aspect of the course seems especially strong and successful.

Question 16 asks about most important reasons for taking the course – again, quite a spectrum:

Required in my study programme – 0

Convenient to take – 3

Interested in the topic – 5 (100% - not a surprise?)

I wanted to take a course from this teacher – 1 (oops ...)

Other – 2, including one noting that the course is relevant to his / her thesis.

Question 17 asks for overall satisfaction in the course:

Very satisfied – 60%

Satisfied – 40%

(neutral – “neither satisfied nor unsatisfied” = 0)

18. Qualitative comments

A. In your view, what has worked especially well in the course – i.e., which aspects of the reading, the teaching, etc.?

Forms of teaching.

Course content.

The teacher.

Very helpful to print out the summaries of the articles and then go through them together in class.

I really liked that we talked about ongoing debates and issues → made it easier to comprehend the articles and the things we discussed.

I benefited a lot from the debates in class because they forced me to think and to express myself in English. Very helpful!

I really like the combination of oral presentation, writing papers, lectures and group discussions. The use of these different tools seems logic[al] and benefitting rather than forced.

I did like to get prints of the notes /comments. Yet I would / did print from Fronter anyway, even if taking digital notes in class.

The discussions, group debates and explanations from the professor worked very well;

The readings were sometimes too much, but discussing the articles in class made it easier to understand them without even reading – this is a very good thing, because this way I had the chance to find out / understand what 3 different authors wrote, even though I read just one of them.

Not too many readings for each class: it has helped me be able to prepare for class and know what the focus of the lecture is.

Teaching: using the whiteboard has helped me see connections of ideas and follow the, sometimes, complex “trains of thought.”

In-class presentations / case study presentations as practical illustrations.

Logical order of sessions / learning elements

Lecturer’s use of black/white board – illustrating by drawings / schemes → embedding of ideas in broader contexts.

B. In your view, what could be done to improve the quality of the course for the next time it’s offered?

Sometimes the questions we discussed in class was very difficult. Perhaps it is possible to present them a bit different, so they become easier to discuss.

It would have been helpful to present a first draft of our term papers in class – so that everyone could comment and get feedback on their papers. [**My comment:** yes, this was offered – but only one student came through. ?] But, that said, I am very satisfied with this course and I would recommend it to everyone. (smiley)

I think a slightly clearer overview of what that is expected from both the examination-paper and the obligatory assignment could have been presented in the first lecture.

Also working / discussing in groups seemed to work better than in pairs.

The quality of the course depends on the students too. I think that mandatory attendance would be a good thing, because in that way there will be more people in the class and the discussions will be even more interesting.

It could be helpful to more clearly outline what the “focus” for the class is – even though the readings help outline that. Draw an agenda – “today we will ask these questions,” etc. – for the lecture. Help create a system of it all. It can sometimes become abstract (but interesting) and challenging to keep track of all the information.

Too little use of students’ readings → more repetition than start with discussion.

Too extensive notes / own text summaries given by lecture (not interactive / engaging enough)

More mini-presentations / practical daily examples / insights [some of the most critical, if help comments – by same student marked with * below]

C. Any additional comments, suggestions, criticisms, etc.?

This has been a great course, which I am really glad I chose, with interesting aspects to take away to other fields. I did like how some of the philosophical lectures made me understand what I have already read in exphil better / in a new/ current way.

If anything, a paper is not my favorite way to exam, but it’s an understandable choice. Thank you!

I enjoyed this course very much and it was very helpful and interesting knowledge [that] I took away from it.

Some of the readings were maybe too difficult. Can’t remember the titles/ authors, but they sometimes were distracting. (Hybridity article?)

* As said before: less [?? unsure of word] of lecture, more prepared discussions / presentations
given discussion questions often slightly too abstract / demanding → that is, too complex to be answered ad- hoc / spontaneously
long time of teaching could be shortened, but short session (1,sh - ??) good