

Course evaluations report

SOSANT2000 – Current themes in contemporary anthropology

Elina Hartikainen, Alessandro Rippa, Camilla Mevik

Course evaluations were carried out on February 27, 2024. The format we selected for the evaluations featured four open ended questions, which students addressed in writing during class. The key aims of the evaluations were the following:

- To gain practical, hands-on feedback on how to improve lectures and in-class activities for the rest of the term. This was particularly important to us because 1) this is the first we teach this course, after it has been re-designed and taught by the same person for a few years; and 2) we have been actively trying to include group-work among students during the lectures.
- To assess whether there is any major issue with the course content that would require broader changes to future iterations of the course.
- To assess to what extent the course was meeting its stated objectives in the eyes of the students, and what (if anything) was missing.

The four questions we asked were the following:

1. What elements of lecture have been most beneficial to your learning? Lectures, group presentations, something else? Is there something we could do in class to further help your learning?
2. Are the readings comprehensible and useful? How can we help you better understand and engage with the reading? Is the distinction between core and supplementary readings useful, or is it confusing?
3. What elements of the seminars have been most beneficial to your learning? Discussion of lectures and readings, feedback on reflection essays, something else? Is there something we could do in the seminars to further help your learning?
4. If you could change or add one thing to this course, what would it be? For example, are there topics missing from the present syllabus or lectures, that you would like to discuss? Or topics (or readings) that you do not find particularly interesting? Or, is there something about the structure of the course that you would change?

In total, 23 students submitted their responses. In what follows, we summarise students' feedback for each question, before outlining what changes we are considering to implement as a consequence of this feedback.

Summary of answers:

1. Students seem to like the format of the lecture, and particularly the fact that we summarise, during the first part of a lecture, what we discussed the prior week. This ties the content of the course together, and helps learning. We received mixed feedback on the group presentations we feature during the first part of the lecture. Some like it, others do not find it very insightful.
2. The response to this question was overwhelmingly positive: students like the readings, and like the distinction between core and recommended readings.

3. Students are very happy with the seminar format, both in terms of the feedback they receive from the instructor, the peer feedback, and the discussion of news.
4. Feedback varies here. Some students asked for longer assignments, saying that 500-word summary papers are too short. Other asked for more feedback on their papers. A more consistent request is to explain in more detail the content of the final exam, and how this is supposed to differ from the summary papers they write during the semester.

Conclusions and planned changes

In general, feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and clearly points to the fact that there is no need for an overhaul of the course. Still, small adjustments can surely be made and these can be beneficial for in-class participation, and students' overall comprehension of key notions and texts. Below, we list changes that we plan to implement this term, and others that we will consider for next year.

Planned changes during ongoing semester:

- We will take some time during a lecture to explain the format of the final exam in detail. We will, in particular, highlight what we expect the differences between final exam and summary papers be, and how we expect students to approach this task.
- We will once again stress the fact that one of the learning outcomes of group presentations is for students to work in groups, and present in public. These are key skills that will be helpful regardless of the career trajectory students will choose.

Planned changes for future iterations of the course:

While it is too early to actively “plan” changes, the following is a list of possible changes that we will be discussing after the term, and that we will seek further feedback from students in the course of the semester.

- Re-think the role and format of group presentations. We could a) shorten them (by taking out the interactive part); b) move them to the seminars; c) frame them around a piece of news, rather than just a summary of texts.
- Add an instructor-led interactive session during the lectures. This could be a discussion centered around news, or an exercise around the readings.
- Change name of “summary paper,” as these are not really a “summary” and it can be confusing for students. Options could be “reflection papers” or “mini-essays”.
- Discuss the possibility of featuring fewer (4, instead of 5) but longer (1000 words, instead of 500) summary papers.
- There does not seem to be any need to radical changes in the readings, and we should keep the difference between core/additional. If changes will be made, these will be minor.
- Some students were asking for sessions on religion and feminist anthropology. While there is probably no need to have additional sessions, these are themes we need to make sure are properly covered.