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Course leader's evaluation of INFOMEVI 201: Technology, culture and society (autumn 2014)

INFOMEVI201 ran from September 1 until November 10th, 2014, and the exam was held in late November. At the start of the semester 53 candidates were registered. 43 students completed the required course work and submitted the exam.

The course had two main approaches to technology: the history of media technologies in Western societies, and various theoretical approaches to this large topic. The course aimed to provide students with historical knowledge and theoretical understanding of the role of media and information technologies in modern societies, with a special focus on the tradition of "medium theory" - which is both historical and theoretical.

Here I will evaluate the following elements of the course: lectures, reading list, seminars and exam. I will also be quoting from seminar leader Kjersti Lill Sjørgård's report. I'm suggesting moderate improvements in light of this autumn's experience. While it is true that the course is being revised and will be relaunched as "MEVI204 Media technology and society", I believe that these learning points should nevertheless be taken into consideration.

The lectures

The lecture series consisted of two types of lectures; historical and theoretical ones. Altogether, I presented five historical periods and six theories of technology. The historical lectures attracted fewer students than the theoretical ones. Of the 53 registered students, between 15-25 students attended the lectures on a regular basis. However, the lectures were video recorded and published by DigUiB, and the students were required to watch them before seminar groups if they had not attended the "live" lecture. So the total attention to the lectures was probably higher than in regular, non-podcast lecture series.

The video podcast was made using an automated two-camera set-up that captures the lecturer and the slideshow, and in addition a microphone. The videos are accessible on this website:

<https://video.dig.uib.no/engage/ui/index.html?series=3bbca71c53e0503062d13f93b0a973ca>.

All in all the lectures were rather successful. Because of the extra public exposure created by the video publishing, I prepared extra carefully, and this benefited me and the students alike. Here is the first comment from seminar leader Kjersti Lill Sjørgård (in Norwegian): «To av tre seminargrupper fikk utlevert evalueringsskjema på siste seminar. Tilbakemeldingene fra forelesningene var gode. Godt forklart, interaktivt og godt illustrert. Litt lite tid, mye info på liten tid. Veldig bra med oppfordring til å delta aktivt under forelesningene. Det som utpekte seg særlig var at alle var veldig fornøyde med at forelesningene var digitalt tilgjengelig på nett. Med en liten ulempe med at

studentene av og til uteble. Flott med musikk i pausene. Professoren var kjempehyggelig!»

Along with seminar leader Sjørgård I took the initiative for a social gathering once a month at Wesselstuen. Students liked this a lot, according to Sjørgård: «Det ble satt pris på den sosiale biten, med pils med foreleser og avslutning med quiz og kake. Og entusiasmen hos både professor og seminarleder. Det var i noen tilfeller utfordrende med mange variabler av godt språk»

Recommendation: Continue to video publish the lecture series, try to make more fuzz about the course among exchange students, so that it becomes an interesting academic event for international and national students alike.

Reading list

The reading list for this autumn's course was quite demanding, with 650 pages of broad communication history and 460 pages of original texts dealing with technology theory, as well as secondary texts explaining the traditions. Each lecture had a reading assignment that was presented in advance.

Students were better at reading theory than history. The seminar only dealt with theories, and this is probably the explanation for why students ended up dealing too little with history. Throughout the semester I felt that history was less engaging than the theories about innovation, determinism, etc. It also seemed that theory was simpler than history, something that surprised me. Sjørgård reports: «I tilbakemeldinger på seminaropplegget ble det nevnt at det var lærerikt å sammenligne teorier". In my view the history of communication is vital in order to understand media technologies, and cannot be removed from the reading list. On the contrary, we should try to engage the students in a better way than now!

Recommendation: The seminar should deal equally with historical and theoretical texts.

Seminars

It is mandatory to attend a seminar group under INFOMEVI201. Master student in media studies, Kjersti Lill Sjørgård, served as coordinator of the seminars. It was mandatory for all students to present a text from the reading list, and to present it with a Powerpoint submitted to Sjørgård before the seminar. This task must be completed in order for the student to submit the final exam, and it worked well as a motivator for student engagement. 43 students made the presentation, and also watched the relevant lecture videos.

Sjørgård has written a thorough evaluation that I will quote from: «Det ble lagt opp til diskusjon av tema fra forelesning samme uke. I seminarene har vi brukt første time til presentasjon av pensumartikler, andre time brukte vi til først diskusjon i mindre grupper og gjennomgang i plenum, med videre diskusjon av relevante eksempler. På grunn av ulik størrelse på gruppene, 17, 11 og 18 stk. var dynamikken i gruppene merkbart ulike. Den minste gruppen var den gruppen hvor diskusjoner i samlet gjeng gikk best. Det virket som at alle ble kjent med hverandre ganske raskt kjent med hverandre, og derfor gikk diskusjonene lettere.»

"De likte at opplegget var basert på diskusjon og at det var interaktivt. I tillegg var det lagt opp slik at alle måtte delta. Nyttig med samling av presentasjoner og sammendrag på minside. Det kunne gjerne vært et ekstra prosjekt med mer vekt på ulike teorier, og ikke bare en. Bra med presentasjoner for egen læring og utvikling, samtidig som det gjorde de fleste mer avslappet i gruppediskusjoner. God atmosfære."

As course leader I am very happy about the seminars. They made the students much more aware of the theories and theorists, since they had to reproduce their arguments in a convincing way. This positive process could also have worked on the historical material, if students for example had to present a certain historical period.

Recommendation (same as above): The seminar should deal equally with historical and theoretical texts, but otherwise function in the same way.

Exam

At the start of the semester 53 candidates were registered. 43 students completed the required course work and submitted the exam. There was a large percentage of students from abroad, among them students from China, the USA, the Czeck Republic, England, Germany, Italy and France.

There was a 4-day home exam. Students were expected to make use of texts from the reading list in the exam paper. The task was as follows: "Compare two technology theories from the reading list, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses in explaining the interaction of humans and technologies. You should focus on actual media developments during one of the historical periods presented in the lectures. The essay should be written in English, and should amount to 4000 words not counting the list of references."

Of the 43 students that completed the exam, only one failed. The rest of the 42 exams were given the following grades:

E - 1 D - 5 C - 19 B - 12 A - 5

The table shows that there were a lot of Cs and Bs. Due to the intense text focus of the lectures and seminar series almost all students can write something sensible about for example determinism and innovation. This explains why so many have a C or better. However, most students focused on the "easiest" theories and avoided more challenging perspectives from phenomenology and actor network theory. Also, very few students had original perspectives on history. They focused on electronic and digital media from our own time instead of dealing the printing press or writing in ancient Sumer. The best candidates managed to combine perspectives in an original way, but the majority didn't.

Recommendation: The exam procedure should remain unchanged.