

ENG333: Selected Topic in English Literature and/or Culture III

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 “African American Literature and the American South.” The reading list consisted 8 novels and 1 short story set in the American South by 20th and 21st century African American authors. Along with the primary texts, the course included theoretical texts related to the overarching theme of the course, as well critical texts dealing with the assigned primary texts.

The class portion (“teaching”) contained 8 weekly-seminar sessions of 90 minutes each between mid-September and mid-November 2018. For each session, students were responsible for reading one primary text and at least one secondary text. Some days they were responsible for two secondary texts. Typically, a few days before each class, students received a document containing ten preparatory questions to consider while reading that week’s assignment.

This 1st-semester master’s course’s focus served to introduce students to a variety of literary texts spanning the 20th and 21st centuries from about 1920-2015. As well, it sought to introduce students to various genres from realism and local color to modernism to postmodernism to sequential art. Along with these texts, I wanted to introduce students to a variety of critical topics and approaches that will help students as they begin to think about their master’s theses. For this, I included readings on postcolonial, reader response, and critical race theory in conjunction with text-specific readings that employed a variety of theories of introduced students to broader historical contexts surrounding the works being studied.

Students

Of 16 registered students, 14 took the school exam. All 14 passed the exam. The distribution of final grades was as follows:

A: 4, B: 4, C: 6, D: 0, E: 0. The average grade was thus: B.

Teaching and learning approach

I entered the course wanting to bring my previous experiences in the classroom into the current course. During the first-class session, I realized that this would not work. For that course, I lectured a little then broke students up into groups to discuss various topics of the texts before returning and engaging in a discussion involving the entire class. What I discovered was that students needed background information for some of the topics and themes that the texts engaged with. As such, I chose to alter my approach for the rest of the semester.

In subsequent class sessions, I would prepare a list of about ten questions that addressed pertinent issues from the primary and secondary readings. Students would receive these questions either before class or sometimes at the start of class. I would provide them with a moment to look over the questions then we would discuss them. I approached the discussion as an exchange of ideas where I, while the expert, did not serve as the center of the course.

That, at times, was untenable due to the information that students needed in order to understand some aspects of the works.

Class discussions went well; however, I noticed, as is true in most courses, that the same students always engaged in the discussion while others chose to listen. Every student, at some point in the semester, spoke up, but there were those who spoke up more than others. One way to counter this would be to reinstitute some form of group discussion, preferably during the first 45-minute part of the seminar. In this manner, students would have the opportunity to express their thoughts about the reading in a more comfortable, small-group setting before returning to a larger-group discussion.

Along with this format, I had two sessions with colleagues who Skyped in to talk with the students. Julian Chambliss at Michigan State University Skyped in to talk with students about sites of memory and the construction of the Southern myth when we read T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville*, and John Jennings and Damian Duffy Skyped in to discuss their graphic novel adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. These sessions allowed students to gain insight into the historical aspects of the works we read and insight into the creative process of adopting a novel into a graphic format.

In conjunction with these in-class approaches, I worked to engage students on Mitt UiB and other platforms. This process did not pan out as much as I had hoped it would, partly, I think, because participation in discussions did not carry any weight in terms of grades. I also took a cue from a colleague back in the United States and worked to get students engaged with a broader community via Twitter by setting up the hashtag #uib333. Here, I shared articles that may be interesting to students and other random items about the course in hopes that they would engage with the discussion and that a broader audience would engage as well. To a certain extent, this went well; however, we did not get much broader engagement from outside of our own course.

One problem that I found was that students had a hard time keeping up with the readings. I had students tell me that they had not had the chance to finish a text before class, but they told me how far they had gotten. This did not hinder their interactions in class, and I found out that after the class sessions ended they were able to complete the texts. As well, I organized a film screening of the adaptation of Frank Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow*. Students enjoyed this, especially the discussion of how the film differs from the novel.

Student feedback

Only 6 of the 16 students provided student feedback in the end-of-semester survey sent out by the administration. Students expressed that the discussion, study questions, and Skype discussions helped them learn. Others, though, commented that they would prefer to have discussions in smaller groups. I agree that this would be beneficial, but the problem I encountered was students needed more background information to thoroughly engage with the topics and themes, and given such a limited time, 90 minutes per session, small groups would not facilitate this. Another recommendation came from L students. One suggested having summaries posted after each session. I have done this before in other classes, and I think it works well. Typically, I type up about a page or two of notes, chronicling three important things we discussed, and post it on MittUiB.

Conclusions and overall assessment

- **Course topic and readings:** The amount of material for an 8-week seminar was daunting. Students struggled to complete the readings on time, but they did complete them. The mixture of primary texts along with secondary and theoretical sources allowed students to engage with the novels in a variety of ways.
- **Approach to teaching and learning:** As discussed earlier, the teaching and learning were good. However, I do think that I could alter my pedagogic approach in some ways to better benefit the students. This would come about through more small-group work and through summaries of class discussions.
- **One of my initial concerns for the course was about the number of sessions and amount of time students had to get face-to-face instruction.** Eight 90-minute sessions only provide students with 12 hours' worth of class time. In the United States, we have 15-week courses that meet for 3 hours a week which equals 45 hours of course time per semester. This amount, while considerably longer, does not allow for a completely thorough discussion of the course topic. For the course, deciding the most important aspects of the text(s), while also considering the pertinent historical information that students needed, proved somewhat difficult. Perhaps adding a few more sessions, 3 or 4, would help students get a firmer grasp on the material and historical background.
- **Assessment:** Students performed extremely well on the exam, and the external examiner expressed her praise for their insights. In thinking about assessment, I would prefer to have students work on a supervised term paper. When dealing with a timed school exam, some students expressed frustration at having to recall information under a stressful timed environment. Speaking from personal experience, this is difficult to do. A supervised term paper would provide students with more face-to-face time with me, on an individual or small-group basis, and allow students to flesh out ideas in a broader manner than they would be able to in a school exam.