

ENG336: Selected Topic in English Literature and/or Culture

Course Report, Spring 2019

Course content and schedule

The course topic for this semester—"What Is Caribbean Literature?"—gave a brief insight into Anglophone Caribbean literature from its beginnings in the 1600s to the end of the twentieth century. The primary readings that consisted of five short novels, a short story, and a selection of poems covered critical historical moments in and aspects of the Caribbean region—from the history of the colony, cultural and ethnic diversity, hybridity, orality and its Creole ("patwa") inflections, to tourism. An array of cultural, critical, and theoretical texts by primarily Caribbean and postcolonial writers and thinkers were adopted to strengthen the theme of Caribbeaness.

The regular course consisted of 8 seminar sessions of 90 minutes each held over four weeks from mid-January to early February. This compressed course was carefully structured before its start, but the record number of registered students (32) and an inadequate number of available books at the University bookstore made it difficult to follow the original plan. While the planning of the course took into account the scheduling of our regular Master courses in the spring, thus avoiding overlaps with other course offerings, teacher education students (the course majority) had a course in pedagogy, which made their workload challenging if not unfeasible. In order to help the students master the material and compensate for a difficult start, the students were offered four 45-minute sessions over two weeks (weeks 11 and 12), which helped them better prepare for their school exam at the end of February.

Students

Student attendance was very good for the most part, although our working conditions were less suitable because of limited space and sitting arrangements. Of 32 registered students, 29 took the exam. The distribution of grades is as follows:

A: 5, B: 5, C: 12, D: 1, E: 5, F: 1. The average grade was C.

Teaching

Originally designed as a seminar with short lectures, the size of the class (student numbers and the size of rooms), the unavailability of books, the complexity of secondary sources and the students' inability to come adequately prepared forced me to spend more time lecturing than I had planned. When seminar rooms were of adequate size, the much-preferred group or pair work worked well although not all students were active in our summing-up plenum discussions. As hard as it is to inspire our silent students to speak, it is no less difficult to get the more active ones less eager to speak. When, in the additional two weeks of classes, I arranged a special session for teacher education students, they all performed well and ascribed their reluctance to speak to the size of class and their lack of training in literary studies.

Lecturing at the Master level is hardly an adequate technique and demands as much of the instructor as of the students, especially when presenting and discussing theoretical texts. The students were given prompts what to focus on in particular texts before or in class, and we paid special attention to key sections of and other passages in the texts that they found

challenging. These texts were most often of theoretical nature, except for poetry that we studied in detail because of culture-specific elements (the musical style of West Indian calypso and “patwa”). While the music we played in class helped the students understand the structure of some of the poems, the local Creole idiom that they studied at home led them to misinterpretation. The poet’s translations handed in class rectified the misunderstanding and the relevant theoretical texts explained the politics of language in West Indies and provided them with adequate concepts as tools.

In order to see how the students were working with more challenging texts and to change the rhythm in class, I occasionally offered Kahoot quizzes that served as a basis for discussion afterwards. Many of the things we did were not planned before we started but resulted from the teaching situation that we had in a crowded seminar room. The students seemed to enjoy alternative ways of teaching, though this demanded more preparation on the part of instructor and did not work for all.

Besides the already mentioned challenges, the one that impeded our faster progression was that the students had a hard time keeping up with the readings with two sessions a week. The unavailability of books at the beginning of the semester is not new; spring 2019 was my third semester in a row that started with too few ordered books and without even knowing how many books to order, which calls for some kind of a preliminary registration for the course. Moreover, courses of 32 students are hard to handle and teacher education students who are now in the majority deserve a specially designed course and a schedule that they could meet.

Student feedback

22 of the 32 registered students in the course provided student feedback at the end of the course, prior to which I had met with class representatives twice to find out about their work and progression.

The students were divided in their assessment of the method of teaching, the size and level of difficulty of the syllabus, and the course progression. There is no doubt that working in groups engages the students, enhances their participation and learning, is popular with the students, and should have been used more often, yet our physical conditions in class prevented it.

Although it is unclear what group of students the evaluation respondents belong to, supplementary comments reveal that teacher education students were less satisfied with the course. Some found it irrelevant and expressed a wish for specially tailored courses that would help them in their future career, while others wanted to be exempted from obligatory courses in literature.

The majority of students found the course demanding and its progression too fast, which the size of the class, compressed teaching, and different student needs had intensified. For the vast majority (77%), the syllabus was adequate in relation to the number of credits and in relation to their overall studies. All students, however, appreciated four additional sessions and L students in particular highlighted the value of a separate session with their group.

Conclusion and general assessment

The make-up of the class resulted in diametrically opposite views of different student groups judging by the written feedback, even though the respondents' specialization is unspecified. This in reality implies that 1) overcrowded seminars do not work, 2) teacher education students need, and deserve, own seminars, 3) crash courses are pedagogically challenging if offered together with other courses, and 4) different student groups prefer different methods of instruction and approach.

My switching between seminar and lecture formats were inspired by the students' level of preparedness and willingness to speak in class, the compressed format of the course, and the need to cover the material. With the student evaluation in mind, it is clear that that the syllabus was considerable and could have worked better if downsized. Although this was not broached in the student evaluation, the exam format is inadequate at the MA level, though any other format would have been difficult with such a large group of students. On the positive side is the fact that all the students were happy to be finished with the course before they either started on other courses or started their teaching practice.