

ENG125: Introduction to British Literature and Culture

Course Report, Spring 2019

COURSE CONTENT AND SCHEDULE

There were 17 two-hour lectures on the syllabus and 11 two-hour seminars, covering English literature and culture from the Anglo-Saxon period through to today. As usual teaching went over the entire semester, with weeks 8 and 9 off for the York trip to the Norwegian Study Center. The lectures were divided among three lecturers, and the 5 seminar groups were taught by three instructors including two doctoral students, both teaching the course for the second time.

TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACH

The lectures discuss the literature and relevant historical and cultural context, while the seminars continue discussion of the literature and practice relevant skills needed for the one-week home exam (2500-2800 words) at the end of the semester. The prepared group activities that were developed a few years ago are still in use in the seminars, with success. The seminar instructors were advised to use these common teaching resources in order to standardize the teaching all the students receive, but the materials could be adapted to suit the instructor's preference and the students' perceived needs. These group activities target specific skills such as responding to prompts, gathering evidence from texts, analyzing textual and historical evidence, comparing different texts, using technical literary terms, analyzing different literary forms, and identifying and ultimately creating thesis statements.

In the home exam itself the students can choose from four prompt options, each of which compares three texts from different periods and in different genres. In order to help prepare for this exam, the students work with sample exams in their seminars, and also use the "Writing Toolkit" developed a few years ago and updated at the beginning of the semester. This resource covers all aspects of what is expected in the home exam essay and how to prepare for it. In addition the students are encouraged to participate in a weekly 'writer's workshop' offered by the Fulbright teaching assistant, which runs throughout the semester and offers additional writing training for the students.

STUDENTS AND EXAM RESULTS

Registered in the course were 143 students; 117 students took the exam. The grade distribution was close to the usual bell curve although there were fewer A and B grades and more C grades. However, fewer failed this year. The problem continues that not enough students attend lectures, and the students often have not prepared the reading in advance of the lectures and seminars. The students self-reported that 50% of them spent about 2 hours per week preparing independently, while only 39% had spent more than 2 hours – and 11% spent less than 2 hours. This preparation falls far short of what is expected from a 15-credit course (i.e. half a semester's workload). Poor preparation makes it challenging to teach the seminars

when maybe half of the 25-30 students in each group have done any of reading, and very few have read to completion.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

The end-of-semester official student evaluation received 56 responses. An average of 90% responded that course content was readily available, that there was sufficient information about the course, and that the level of difficulty was adequate. 80% responded that the progression speed was adequate, while 20% responded that it was too fast. However, 95% responded that the syllabus was adequate in relation to the points value of the course, so the students seem to feel that they are being assigned a reasonable amount of reading, though some still feel it is too much (we cut some readings last year and the year before) and as noted above, far fewer than half the students spend enough time studying independently. But 95% felt that the learning outcomes were achieved.

Some issues recurred in the student evaluations that would be worth taking into consideration in future iterations of ENG125. Many students commented that the seminars were effective, but that there could be more opportunities for writing practice. Some relevant responses:

- “The focus on writing is alarmingly low. There have to be uni-organized study groups.”
- “We should have more hand ins during the semester to get more feedback on our writing skills since the exam is a paper and there has been no evaluation during the course which could have improved our exam.”
- “There should be more practical essay writing training. In seminar we were given prompts to follow, but to invent our own prompts is harder. I would have liked to get a better grip of what the censors look for in an essay in terms of what is a good thesis and what is not.”

ENG125 had a supervised pass/fail term paper some years ago but it was removed because of lack of instructor resources (it used up the equivalent of one full-time teaching load alone). In its place we developed the common seminar activities to help provide the same training and feedback, and since then the final exam grade averages have remained about the same if not better than with the term paper. However, the instructors also still feel that more writing practice would be preferred. Turning the established seminar group activities into writing assignments that are peer- and/or instructor-reviewed could be a good solution to the need for regular writing practice and feedback. Some student respondents (or at least one) noted that the seminar activities were more effective if done in groups *before* the seminars and then using the seminars to discuss the results and improve on them. Perhaps this could be combined with period required writing assignments on a smaller scale than a full term paper. This approach had been raised by the instructors a few years ago and would be worth returning to, especially if some changes could be incorporated already for next semester without having to change the official emnebeskrivelse.

A few (or at least one) student noted an issue with the balance between literature and history/culture:

- “The learning outcomes listed on uib.no focus more on terminology and overall political history, whereas the lectures and seminars have focused on the analysing the

texts and discussing themes. They are obviously connected, but the learning outcomes stated seem different from what we've actually talked about. Particularly when we keep being told to try to avoid using literature that isn't stated on the curriculum when we write our exams. So finding societal information is not prioritised.”

Balance between literature/culture has come up before in conversations with students, with students sometimes wishing for more history and culture in lectures than is currently included. This balance might be worth re-assessing by the instructors.

At least one student expressed strong concerns about the homogeneity of the authors represented in the syllabus. (Because the evaluations are only “samlet” and regrettably not available as individual responses, it is impossible to tell if this is a single or multiple students, though it seems likely to be a single respondent). The relevant comments:

- “As it was mainly composed of straight white cis men, it failed to be relevant for a country’s literature that is so much more than that. For a university in 2019 it is frankly embarrassing.”
- “I wish there would have been a more critical approach to the racism in *Heart of Darkness*. Don’t give white straight cis males the majority of the curriculum, and let everyone else scramble for the left overs. That time has passed.”
- “More thought could have been given to what texts and authors were chosen. I appreciate that an attempt has been made to pick diverse authors, and it's great that there were some women, but we could have at least had a lecture about the only text by an author of colour. It would also be nice to bring this aspect more to light so that more people are made aware of the current situation of BAME authors and characters.”

Such a response gestures towards recent world-wide efforts to “decolonize” reading lists in higher education, by making them less dominated by white, middle-class, male, cis, voices and more evenly representing other voices with varieties of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I agree with this student that such an effort is extremely important both in terms of more realistically representing the rich and often difficult history of English literature and culture, but also for helping our students from different backgrounds feel that voices like theirs are represented in the syllabus. I have been thinking for some semesters about the serious problem of teaching white colonialist texts like *Oroonoko* and *Heart of Darkness* without any (or enough) criticism of them by black or brown critics, or without also assigning other literary texts by black or brown authors that offer a counter-narrative to the white colonizer. Oslo is currently grappling with the need to decolonize their syllabi and are even hosting a seminar on the issue the week I write this report (involving Rebecca Scherr among others). I think the ENG125 instructors should work together before next semester to find some resources to help us to decolonize this course, and to critically re-assess the assigned readings and how we teach them.

A good reminder that recording lectures, as we have occasionally done in the past, would be a practice worth revisiting, from this student:

- “Posting all lectures as videos would also be a benefit, so people who are unable to come can still view them and those who want can review them due exam season.”

At least one student reported that their books came in very late from Akademika, causing them to get behind, so in the future it would be worth encouraging Akademika to order more books in advance.

Several students expressed their satisfaction with the course as a whole, for example:

- “overall the best course I have taken at UIB :)”

CONCLUSIONS AND OVERALL ASSESSMENT

From the instructors’ experiences and the students’ feedback several opportunities for improvement emerge, that should be considered for next semester but also in terms of the larger redevelopment of the English BA program:

- Even stronger emphasis on expectations for time spent preparing for the course outside the classroom, to try to increase reading preparation by the students
- Create student-led study groups that complete the seminar activities in advance and using seminar to discuss the results and go beyond with additional analysis
- Incorporate some kind of written hand-in(s) to give the students feedback on their writing skills before the final exam (i.e. what the course once had but was cut due to limited teaching resources) – possibly in tandem with the seminar group activities, so more regular and smaller assignments than the term paper format used in the past. This could utilize student peer-review if adequate training is given to the students.
- Recording and posting all lectures (a service offered by UiB and used occasionally in the past)
- Re-assess the balance between literature and culture/history especially in lectures
- “De-colonize” the syllabus to have a more balanced representation of diverse authors including people of color, indigenous people, women, and queer people, and to have more explicit awareness and examination of the intersecting power relations of race, class, gender, and indigeneity that shape English literature and culture

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