

AK2210 Political Ecology – course analysis HT20

Course overview

Title: Political Ecology

Course code: AK2210

Credits: 7.5 credits

Examination: INL1 (essay, 5.0 credits, A-F), PRO1 (group project, 2.5 credits, A-F)

Number of students: 13

Activities: 14 seminars, group project, individual essay work

Courses leader: Marco Armiero, Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment

Examiner: Nina Wormbs, Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment

Description of the course evaluation process

Students were invited to provide feedback in an anonymous format. One student volunteered to gather those short comments from the group as a whole and then sent them to the course leader.

Description of meetings with students

In order to offer the possibility of a relaxed and frank evaluation of the course, the course leaders implemented a tailor-made written, anonymous form of feedback.

Course design

The course was designed as an introduction to political ecology, assuming that our students are not familiar with that field and, more generally, with social science studies of environmental issues. The main objective was to make the students aware of the methods and concepts employed in that field. For this aim, we used a handbook of political ecology which helped students to acquire some basic knowledge, such as: the genealogies of the field, the main methods and theories. We then focused on specific themes through a collection of short readings pointing, in particular, to the contributions that political ecology can offer to current socio-environmental problems including toxicity, risks and climate change. The students were guided through their readings by a specific question they were supposed to answer before each seminar.

Participation in the seminars was highly encouraged and appreciated. It was implemented through open questions which the instructors would pose during the class to all students. Since there were only 13 students, the instructor did not consider it appropriate to divide the students into groups; however, in their feedbacks some students did remark that they would have appreciated that kind of option. It is a difficult issue, because while the division into smaller groups can indeed help participation it is sometimes also dispersive and it is hard for the instructor to evaluate the kind of discussion happening in the groups. It should also be noted that participation in the classes was part of the assessment.

Students' workload

The course leader was extremely pleased with students' commitment to this course. Probably the fact that it is an elective course, with a rather marked profile, selects almost by itself the most motivated students.

Students' results on the course

Following the previous answer, I can only remark that political ecology students generally perform very well. This has been a constant character of the course. It is not unusual that political ecology students then decide to write their master thesis with us (4 students in 3 years).

Students' answers to open questions

In general, students had a positive impression of the course and of the course leaders for creating a safe environment where one can speak and contribute. Critical points were some communication through Canvas and difficult readings.

The students stressed that the course was introducing them to new ideas and fields. This was interesting but also a challenge (some readings were considered too theoretical). Some would have liked to have a more applied approach (how to use political ecology in combatting current environmental problems). For some, there was too much content in each class. Some appreciated the possibility to speak up and participate but also lamented that they would have liked more space for it (perhaps through working in smaller groups). Due to the pandemic, the course was offered online only and several students commented that this might have affected the level of their participation. Some students have expressed their satisfaction with the final assignment, which they found more engaging than a usual essay. Nonetheless, a few have also asked for an earlier explanation of it.

Summary of students' opinions

The general impression was quite positive. The critiques were well posed and mostly not too difficult to be addressed. It may be noted that this course started quite recently at KTH. We started with a very theoretical course and following up on each year's course analysis we have then progressively moved towards a more empirically oriented course. We have also adjusted the final assignment in the same direction, offering the students the possibility to work on concrete cases. Still, there is space for improvement on this specific issue.

Analysis

The balance between theory and "practice" remains a critical point in this course. It could be addressed either with a clear description of its nature and aims (informing potential students that it will not have a hand-off part) or developing more that part. We have already moved in the latter direction, proposing, for instance, a very practical final assignment. As a matter of fact, this move has been appreciated by students. Nonetheless, concentrating the "practical" part of the course only to the final assignment was too little and did not solve the unbalance. Next year we plan to develop a small research project which can be implemented by the students during the course. Part of the course might be done at the Environmental Humanities Laboratory in small research units. We will consider, in this context, the possibility of offering more classes. Gender appears to have been a relevant factor shaping the participation in the discussions. There is a need to divide students into smaller groups and to optimize the use of Zoom. Some international students raised the issue of course materials being too heavily North-American centered, which is probably a correct observation that will be responded to next year. There were no students this year with disabilities.

Prioritized course development

Developing the hand-off part of the course is a priority. In the short term, the readings can also be improved, whereby we will avoid those which would require backgrounds that are not common among students at a technical university. We will carefully decide every year,

depending on student numbers and students' own preferences, on whether or not to divide them into smaller groups for the discussion activities. In the longer run, we might try to have some more classes, and perhaps even increase the number of credits awarded; those additional classes could help to expand the "practical" part, while they would also help to "dilute" the concepts which now seem to crowd the classes.