

Course evaluation - SH2203, VT20

Introduction

It was a very unusual course this year, because only two students had registered for the course (it has normally been around 15 students, and one year almost 30 registered students). My newly arrived PhD student also attended most of the lectures, making it three students attending the lectures at most. It was a strange feeling teaching for so few students, but the upside was that it was easy to arrive at an informal atmosphere where the students were comfortable asking questions.

Since there were so few students, I decided to try something different this year for the self evaluation. Instead of a evaluation form, this year I instead did a face-to-face interview with one of the students after the course to get a more in-depth reflection on the course from a single student (also allowing for a dialogue to develop regarding the feedback, instead of the one-way communication of the evaluation form).

Impressions from the interview

We started out discussing the general impressions of the course and the lectures. The opinion of the student followed well the impressions from evaluation forms from previous years, so in general a good impression.

Then we started discussing the book, and the reading instructions that are given out at the end of most lectures (in preparation for the next lecture). According to the student the instructions were followed a couple of times in the beginning of the course, but not after every lecture. My own reflection is that I can feel like I do not make as strong of an impression about the reading instructions anymore, mostly because I feel like the course book is somewhat sub-par in explaining some of the topics. Of course I should have ignored such thoughts during the lectures, but I can reflect back afterwards and realise that I made a mistake there. Nevertheless, a very important point was brought up by the student that the book was heavily used, and helpful, when it came to solving the home assignments. It is true that some of the difficult problems tackle subjects where actually there is a good description in the book, and where it can be helpful to read carefully. So in the end the book served a good purpose there, and the home assignments forced the students to study the book intensely during the course.

The student also echoed my belief that home assignments and student seminar are superior examination forms over a written exam, since they force a much larger time-on-task early in the course and it reduces the workload and stress towards the end of the course. It was also reflected upon that there have not been many other occasions where they have had to present a topic in front of the class, so that is clearly a very valuable experience.

Finally we discussed the content of the home assignment. The feedback from the interviewed student was that the longer problems where there is not a clear recipe to follow are interesting, and that the process of finding information and trying to perform the calculation by oneself is fun. So that is comforting, since I am also aware that some students find it a bit intimidating when the topics in the home assignments have not been discussed in class beforehand. There is probably a shifting spectra of how comfortable the students are with the problems, but as has been the case every year there is a strong

support from the students that the home assignments lead to a better learning experience (and the fact that they were each worth around 1.5 hp also led to an acceptance that a lot of work were expected to solve the problems). The students expressed the wish to receive back the previous set of assignments before having to hand in the next, which I completely agree is very reasonable but which I know from experience can be almost impossible due to the time it takes to correct the home assignments. It would be a good idea to review the scheduling of the three sets of home assignments again next year, and see if they can be arranged so that there is a little bit more time in between them (it will necessitate that the first set is handed out very early after the start of the course though).

Overall, the interview was extremely useful to me, as it allowed to me to gain a better understanding of how the home assignments are perceived and what the role of the course book is to the students in the course.

Items for next year

Next year I will again try to find the time to find a new course book for the course. I now have a good candidate book in mind, "Elementary Particle Physics, an Intuitive Introduction" by Andrew Larkoski. If it is possible to find the time it takes to read and work through the book I would like to make the switch next year. An important point that was raised during the interview is that the current home assignments are somewhat coupled to the current course book, and I would have to invest additional time to also update the home assignments to be more in line with the content of the new book.