

Reporting on experiments with research integration in teaching

Name
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Course Name
Religion, Popular Culture and the Media in Africa, thematic course, spring 2021: Thematic course: Religion, Popular Culture and the Media - 2020/2021 (ku.dk)
Study Board
Study Board for African Studies
Level and class size
MA level, first year, 5 students registered for the course
Description of the experiment
<p>The course was organized around a group of researchers that all work within the fields of religion, popular culture, and the media in Africa. The entire course took place online and the participating researchers/teachers were based in Denmark, Ghana, and Nigeria. During the first weeks of the course, the teachers presented key concepts and literature pertaining to the overall theme of the course. The second step consisted of the teachers presenting their own research focusing on and presenting the material they work with and discussing how they analyze it, rather than their research findings per se. During the third part of the course, the students presented and worked with their own research ideas. Firstly, they presented their initial ideas at a joint workshop and received feedback from the lecturers. In the next phase the students collected their own material (mainly online) and relevant literature, which was then discussed and analyzed collectively in class. The students continued working with their small research projects and these served as the basis for their written exam papers. At the end of the course, we organized a seminar with an external keynote speaker. All participants in the course (both lecturers and students) presented their work and received feedback and comments. We also included a session on how to communicate research on social media (focusing on Twitter). After the end of the course (including the exam), I have continued to work with two of the students. They are still engaged in the research process (collecting more data) and we have discussed how and what ways they can publish their work. Both will co-write an article for public dissemination with the online site Globalnyt together with one of their journalists. We are also considering an academic/scientific outlet, but that work has not come to fruition yet. We invited and included other scholars (PhD students and senior scholars) in the classes and the final seminar when relevant. This created a dynamic atmosphere but might also have been overwhelming for students.</p>
Outcome for the students
<p>All students expressed that they very much enjoyed the course. They highlighted that they learned a lot from being part of a research group and taking part of the discussions and exchanges within that group (even if it wasn't always active participation from the students' side). Several expressed that it was their favorite course during the MA program. They also emphasized that having scholars based on the African continent to teach them was a great asset and something they learned from. Two of the students have continued their research projects even after the course has ended, and they are gaining important insight into the length and breadth of a research process, which it is difficult to gain over a seven-week course.</p>
Outcome for the research
<p>For the research the experiment has brought deeper insight into areas of the research theme that I (and my co-lecturers) did not have specific knowledge about or direct research experience with. In that way it has both opened up and consolidated the knowledge of the research field. More concretely, teaching the course, the experiment included, has led to the establishment of a reading group on the theme that consist of the lecturers of the course. The students have also been invited</p>

to join but have so far not participated. Moreover, I have been able to focus on areas within the research field that were new to me and this has led to research collaboration between myself and one of the lecturers (currently co-writing a book chapter on street preaching in Ghana and Nigeria as popular culture).

Interaction between teaching, research and exams

The exam (a written exam paper) came in as a disturbing element in the experiment. It was clear that when we approached the exam deadline and the end of the course, the students became more concerned about issues such as length of the exam paper, structure, and formal issues, and the research itself was given less attention in the exchanges in class. I also find that the exam came too early if we think of the students' work as research, so it would have been useful if they could have presented preliminary research findings or have had a later exam deadline. The external examiners are not necessarily aware of the research integration experiment and will assess the exam papers like all other exam papers of a similar kind.

Adapting of the experiment

Due to corona and lockdown I had to change to course from an in-class course to a fully online course. This meant that there were activities we could not do, such as engaging with the research participants as all research was done online. This element was probably also too ambitious for a seven-week course.

Strengths and weaknesses

One of the biggest strengths of the course was to have the resources to bring in other lecturers so that we covered both religion, media studies, popular culture and African literature in an interdisciplinary way. Moreover, it was a strength to break up the conventional course structure and to let students take part of shaping the course as well as taking the lead in organizing specific sessions. This meant that the course outline was prepared along the way and in a highly flexible way. Moreover, the students benefitted a lot from becoming part of a research group and an extended research conversation. The weakness was perhaps the shortness of the course. It was hard for the students to really go into depth with their projects during the time of the course.

Experienced challenges

Teaching online was clearly a challenge, as I am convinced the students would have engaged more if we had been physically in the same room. But on the other hand, it would have been difficult to have the lecturers from Ghana and Nigeria join us for almost the whole course if they had not done so online.

The most important experience

The most important experience is that it is a very fruitful experience to invite students into a research conversation and process. To focus on research as a process and not only the final research findings give important insights into knowledge production and also enables the students to think about their own ways of creating knowledge.

Will the experiment be conducted again?

Parts of the experiment will be conducted again (e.g., the part where students present the literature and data they work with for the class). I am also considering if some aspects of the experiment could be integrated into the thesis writing semester.