

Personal evaluation Research Dissemination SVH-8001-1 20H

Christina Lentz

About the course

The course is intended to give international UiT PhD students an introductory overview over possibilities of research dissemination in regard to a scientific as well as to a general audience. There were 15 participants from different countries and different fields of research. The course put a specific focus on the following topics:

- The Why and How of research dissemination
- How to write scientifically and for general audiences
- How to verbally present research to a scientific and general audience in short presentations and interviews
- How to visualize research in form of poster presentations
- Different ways to disseminate research

In addition to course and group discussions as well as different in and out of class assignment we had some external contributors to the class.

- Hanne Hammer-Stien was talking about “research dissemination through art”
- PhD student Anatolijs Venovcevs was talking about his participation in Forsker Grand Prix
- Torjer Olsen contributed with a talk about “participating in a public debate”
- Per Pippin Aspaas gave an introduction into Open Access

In addition, we had 5 UiT researchers (research dissemination experts) who thankfully took time for student interviews.

Main Aims of the course:

The main aim was to organize a class with me not acting as a “traditional” teacher with a lot of speaking time but rather as a moderator, giving the students lots of possibilities to discuss and work on their own projects.

In the course of the class the students had to work on different forms of dissemination of research

- A short 20 second video teaser of their research
- An article about their research directed towards a general audience
- A draft of a poster presentation for a conference of their own field
- Giving and conducting an interview with a fellow student
- Conducting a group interview with an experienced researcher

The students were supposed to work on assignments they could really use in order to disseminate their research and potentially publish or use at a conference and were therefore supposed to communicate what they wanted to do with their works beyond class.

In general, the class was meant to encourage students to get out of their “comfort zone” of just devoting themselves to research dissemination in the academic field and also try new forms of communicating about their research.

Reflections on the/my realization of the course:

Time management and breaks

This was the first time I taught the course and I got the assignment only a month before the course started. I still had more than enough time to organize the class, but it was on a rather short notice to invite speakers. That is why the first two days/session 1 of the class was rather focused around the class itself, which had the advantage of getting to know each other and each other's research projects well.

The main "mistake" from my side was, that I overloaded the course content wise, which meant that I had to be flexible and spontaneously shift content from session 1 to session 2. Still, the students got very little time for breaks. Also, I am not used well enough to the Norwegian system with lots of tiny breaks and I am still surprised how important these breaks are to the students, especially taken into consideration the fact that they are on a PhD level, where I expected more willingness on focus work.

We handled the situation by joking about it and for day 2 of session 1, which was entirely focused on mutual interviews, I created different interview groups with shifting breaks, which was quite to the satisfaction of the students.

Content

I thankfully received a great introduction into how to manage the course from my predecessor Torjer Olsen. Still, I misjudged some of the content in regard to its relevance to PhD students. This was the case for the one-hour session about blogging. Obviously, this was not of importance at all to the students and nobody was planning of using a blog as a means of research communication. That's why I spontaneously decided to skip this content and rather talk about something else that mattered more.

I also misjudged the knowledge students already had about research dissemination and it turned out that they knew way less than I had expected about how to communicate towards a general audience. This was not a problem at all, since I designed the class on an introductory level, but it still came unexpected.

I was also surprised that the students had extremely little previous knowledge about visualization of research in form of poster presentations. I consider this content rather crucial, since visualization of research is not just relevant for posters but for general presentations as well since it helps a lot to structure thoughts.

In general, I think the course put too much focus on dissemination of research towards a general audience and neglected the academic part of it. I do appreciate that the course includes both, because it gives the opportunity to directly compare the two, but it provides an organizational and structural challenge, because two two-day sessions are actually not a lot of time for the content that is supposed to be taught to the students. I am trying to find a solution for this in the next class, but still don't have a perfect answer to this dilemma to be honest.

Reflection on the students:

I taught a very open minded, friendly and motivated group of students on different stages of their PhD research, some of them still at the very beginning, some of them close to submitting. Even though all the students were very engaged in the class, the submission of their work shows very different levels of quality and engagement. While many of them submitted first class work some of them either showed a lack of interest or simply skill in their assignments.

My biggest surprise was the lack of independent, creative thinking when it came to the course assignments and I would like to talk a little bit about this. The students needed very concrete instructions about what to do and the freedom I was willing to provide in the execution of their tasks was not appreciated by some of the students. To name an example: The students were supposed to write an article directed to a popular audience. Writing the article, they should also consider possible ways to publish it. That could be their research group blog, forskning.no etc. Where you publish such an article of course determines the length and the style of it quite a bit. But still, we had a lengthy discussion about the word count of the article.

Something similar happened when it came to the group interviews that the students conducted with experienced researchers. I wanted them to summon the results of the interviews, either in form of a transcript, or a portrait or simply a summary, but the lack of very concrete instructions was simply overwhelming some of them.

This, of course, was not true for all students, but there was a vocal group of students mainly concerned about “making mistakes” and possibly not to pass the submission of the portfolio in the end.

In my opinion, the main purpose of pursuing a PhD is, beyond producing new knowledge of course, developing creative approaches and own critical thinking and I was totally unprepared to have these kinds of discussions with students at this level.

In session two of the class I learned from this and was very concrete, giving clear examples about every detail of the submission, but it again ended up in a big discussion, fed by fear that their submission could possibly not be acknowledged. I have to admit that I was a bit helpless, because I did not manage to get through to the students with my message that independent thinking and creative approaches are always appreciated in academia, even if they turn out not to be the best approaches. I would never punish students for own thinking, but they were still afraid that the co-sensor or someone else in the system would.

And even though I was extremely clear in my message, learning from my mistakes in session 1, I had to experience that students were not listening to what I said, asking the same questions over and over or simply ignoring the instructions in their final submission.

I was quite lengthy about this even though it only were the final 15 minutes of each session, but of course the fear of making mistakes came up several times during the course. One example for this is that one student wanted to have some literature to read ahead to prepare, because that is what they are used to do for other classes. Of course, this doesn't make too much sense for Research Dissemination, since the course is very much focused on practical work. This very same student by the way came up with a whole new idea of poster presentation and it made me very happy to see the courage to realize own projects.

What would I handle differently or do the same way

As I wrote, I tried to work on the main deficits (time management, communication of class requirements) already while the class was still going on. But there are still some things I would do differently in the next Research dissemination course.

The mutual student interview took a lot of time, even though I established a system where different groups could go on breaks. Next time I will divide the class into two and will have a good student from my previous Research Dissemination class helping me with the interviews. This should save valuable time. Also, we conducted the interviews with experienced researchers on the same day as we conducted the mutual interviews and that created a very tight time schedule. Still, the students gave

me a positive feedback about these expert interviews, and that's why I will stick to them but make them a home assignment.

Again, I will try to work in a more balanced way on research dissemination in academia and in public, but still have to find a good solution for it.

I will plan in more breaks for the next course and try to communicate even clearer without giving up on encouraging students to independent and creative thinking. I like to think of myself as a very relatable and open minded teaching person but I feel that I was not patient enough when the students asked about concrete instructions and did not, as I perceived it, appreciate the freedom I was willing to give them. Even though this concerned just a tiny part of the entire course, I am very unsatisfied with me handling this situation and will absolutely work on being more understanding to the specific needs of my students. I am prepared for this now and will hopefully be able to handle this kind of situation better, if it occurs again next course.

When it comes to content, I learned from the feedback I got from the class and will add two workshops to the next class, one about Twitter (using Twitter; writing a Twitter conference paper) and one about podcasts (general about podcasts, creating a short oral contribution).

There are also things that worked well and that I will keep on doing:

Instead of just let the students draft their assignments, as envisioned in the course description, I will stick to letting the students write a full article with the option to be published. A draft might very well up in the dust bin and it would be a waste of time whereas I want the student to see purpose in what they do.

We invested a lot of time on feedback in class and the students received a short written-feedback for each of their assignments from me on Canvas before the official portfolio submission on Wiseflow. Especially for a class like research dissemination it is extremely important to get a lot input in order to evolve. That's why in addition to my feedback, we also invested a system with feedback teams in regard to the articles written for a publish audience. In that way the students learned not only from their own work but also from the fellow PhD students' work, which also happened whenever we collectively discussed assignments, like for example the posters or the interviews in class.

I was very lucky that a lot of colleagues helped me preparing for this class and contributed to it. They could bring in input that I simply could not. Next class, I will again invite expert speakers.

In general, it was fun teaching this class and I am looking forward to teaching it again with the mentioned adjustments.

Christina Lentz