

Report “forskningsformidling SVH-8002-1 21V

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About the course

The course is intended to give (Norwegian) UiT PhD students an introductory overview over possibilities of research dissemination in regard to a scientific as well as to a general audience. The students should acquire knowledge about different forms of research dissemination, see what works best for them, get out of their comfort zone and be inspired to get active in disseminating their research. There were 14 participants from different fields of research, such as pedagogics, philosophy, tourism, politics, theology etc. 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 “traditionally” and “digitally”

In addition to course and group discussions as well as different in- and out-of-class assignments there were some external contributors to the class.

- Petter Snekkestad was talking about “research dissemination in a museum context”
- PhD student Geneviève Godin was talking about Twitter and twitter conferences
- Torjer Olsen contributed with a talk about “participating in a public debate”
- Karine Nigar Aarskog, Thomas Rolland and Nora McLaren gave an introduction into podcasts
- PhD student Ingri Løkholm Ramberg supported me with the conduction of the interview segment.

Aims of the course:

The main aim was to let the students work on different ways to disseminate their own research. Therefore, there was no general pensum, but a focus on practically working on own projects. Furthermore, the course gave lots of space for discussions, work on projects and mutual feedback.

In the course of the seminar the students worked on the following assignments:

- A short 20-30 second video teaser about 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
- A mutual interview with a fellow student
- A draft for a podcast
- A draft for a twitter conference

With every assignment also came the request to think about the potential “use”, so that the work done in class would actually contribute to distribute their research.

A. Reflections on my conduction of the course

1. Content and the “problem” of a heterogeneous class

Choice of the content

After having taught the course before, I thought I had a good idea about what the students already knew and what they were interested in. It turned out though, that this (Norwegian) group had entirely different backgrounds and interests than their (international) predecessors.

Due to the wishes of the fall-class I organized a workshop about twitter and podcasts for the spring class, but these students didn't seem particularly interested in this. I still don't regret having organized these workshops because they triggered good discussions about research ethics (especially the twitter one), but I definitely planned in too much time for them with 2 hours each. The workshop approach should give the students an opportunity to do some practical work, but in both cases, there was little time for this. The students therefore rightly criticized that fact that the “workshops” were actually not really “workshops”.

The contribution about research dissemination in a museum context also turned out to not be a perfect fit, because most of the students worked in a field where this kind of research dissemination is not the most relevant one. In this context I would like to mention a general problem about the organization of the course: In order to get good contributors, I have to plan months ahead of time. In this case the course was fully planned in November/December 2020. But I only learned which students were accepted to the class at the beginning of February. This makes a “customized” design, fitted to the needs and interests of the students, almost impossible. I do think that the contributions still were of interest for a general PhD student audience, but I nevertheless would have liked to be able to plan more according to the participants' backgrounds.

Different from the last course, the Norwegian PhD students had much more “general” requests, like getting better in free speech and learning more about expressing things “easily” for a popular audience. In a final discussion they suggested to invite for example an actor to give some general advice on presenting. I like the idea and will see if I can find someone who can do this.

Composition of the group

The difference in research backgrounds is a challenge but also a blessing when it comes to trying out how to convey content to a general audience. But it also makes it harder to work on scientific dissemination within the own field, because not all of the students had “partners” from their own background in the class.

The difference in age and interest is another challenge. There was an age range of roughly 20 years among the students in this particular class, and it was harder to get some of the “older” students on board when we had projects like “creating a teaser”, “drafting a twitter conference paper” or “planning a podcast”. I can imagine that not all in this age group – but neither all of the younger students – were happy with this selection of topics. I nevertheless will stick to including both, the “traditional” and the “digital” approach to research dissemination, because to my understanding the course should give students insight into what is possible and what is practiced nowadays. One of the students didn't even know what an academic poster was, and I think that even if you don't need it in your own field, you should have some knowledge about it.

The different approaches to research dissemination led to several discussions if this was too “superficial” and a bad development. I told the students that the course was meant as an introduction

into various ways to disseminate their research and not all ways are similarly appropriate for all subjects. But I also made clear that I appreciated that the students had a very critical approach and actually encouraged them in that attitude. Without any doubt, there is a tendency towards a more superficial way to disseminate research. Presenting yourself and what you do in the right light becomes increasingly important, and this can be both, positive and negative. I will carry the students' input into the next class, because I think we should not only celebrate for example digital media as a way to distribute research but also think about ethical implications and our responsibility as researchers.

Balance of content – academic vs. popular research dissemination

In the last course, I was unsatisfied because I put too much focus on research dissemination towards a popular audience. I wasn't sure on how to create a better "balance" and if this was possible at all. This time, I succeeded much better with that. The focus still was on dissemination for a popular audience, because this is more "unknown" to the students and it was easier to realize in a relatively heterogenous group. But most of the content gave the students a choice if they wanted to create it for a popular or a scientific audience and most of the projects – except from the popular article – could be used in both contexts. There was a big focus on discussions on how to use the "products" and we for example came to the conclusion that even something like the popular teaser could be used as an intro for a contribution to a scientific conference. The twitter conference gave new insights into ways of scientific research distribution and it was made clear that something like a podcast could be designed for a popular and a scientific audience.

Another change I made due to the request and criticism of the last course was that I put an even bigger focus on mutual feedbacks and gave a short introduction on how to do a feedback at the very beginning. I actually don't think that PhD students should need this kind of introduction, but I still (briefly) did it, because of the importance of feedbacks during class and as a consequence of the last students' wishes. I have to mention that in the fall feedback survey also were students who thought that there was too much focus on feedback, but I decided to go with the ones who wanted more: It doesn't make any sense to let the students produce a teaser and not show it to the class and discuss it. Seeing and evaluating other students' work can be a powerful source for improvement and inspiration and this classes' students seemed to have agreed with me about that. Nevertheless, took the feedback sometimes too much time and I will honor one students' advice to limit feedback timewise in the future.

2. Hybrid organization of the class

The entire course had to be organized in a hybrid format because two students participated from outside of Tromsø. I was honestly not happy about this at all, because last time I had major technical difficulties and it is a challenge to take care of and engage students on Zoom and in the classroom equally. Luckily, I got much better support from Orakelet this time and it worked out much smoother than in fall.

I still would like to say something about hybrid teaching: From a didactical view, digital and physical teaching require very different approaches. Therefore, hybrid teaching doesn't make too much sense, and research dissemination class is designed as a physical class, not a digital one. Unfortunately, I additionally had very bad experience with some of the students participating digitally. It seems, they don't take it as seriously as the students in the classroom. One of the two digital students submitted extremely bad assignments and announced a couple of hours before the last day of class that he wouldn't participate because he actually had travelled to a workshop in Kirkenes. While he couldn't come to Tromsø, he obviously could travel to Kirkenes and did not even feel the need to find an agreement with me beforehand. Something rather similar happened with one of the "digital" students

last year, who similarly performed very badly and missed out on large parts of the class. That is why I attribute this behavior to the digital participation.

I see that the hybrid class was due to the Covid-19 situation and that I have to become more flexible when it comes to digital formats. But I also want to guarantee a high quality of the class and equal treatment of all students and experience shows me that with hybrid teaching this is not possible. Unfortunately, some students even take advantage of the potential freedom of digital participation.

3. Time management and breaks

Time management is not my strength and it wasn't in this course either. I can see that I tend to plan too much and never get through all of the content I have. Even though I shortened the content quite a bit compared to the fall class, I even had bigger time struggles, especially the first day of class. This left me personally very unsatisfied, because I had the feeling of not preparing the students sufficiently for the assignments of writing a popular science piece and creating a teaser. After I have been in that situation many times before it looks as if I finally have to take a class about time management to improve in that respect.

On a positive note: The students don't seem to have perceived a deficit in preparation but gave me positive verbal feedback. The results of the assignments are significantly better than in the last class, even though the students were in my perception, less prepared. And the reason for not getting all the content taught was that the students were engaged in very good discussions, so that I deliberately decided to rather let them discuss instead of pushing them through my PowerPoint. But: especially the first two days, the discussions evolved very much around the specifics of the different PhD projects and therefore the course got the character of a research seminar rather than a "how to" seminar. I tried to interfere whenever this happened, but I didn't do well and will have to be stricter next class. The idea would be to point out right at the beginning that in class we focus on the how and not on the what, so that I can refer to that initial remark whenever it happens. But I also have to say that this was new and rarely ever appeared as a problem in the previous course. An explanation could be that I had quite a lot of students of philosophy in this class.

A note on breaks: I know now that in Norway there are 15-minute breaks after each 45 minutes and I again – deliberately – did not stick to this. First of all, do I think that good group work and discussions need more than 45 minutes time to go into depth. An interruption after 45 minutes would be a disruption to intensive work. Secondly, I think that PhD students should learn to focus more than 45 minutes on a task. Thirdly, breaks should not be organized according to timeslots, but according to when they actually make sense content-wise. Especially in a very interactive seminar like research dissemination, I think that it is absolutely doable to work for 60 to 90 minutes without a break. This does not mean that there shouldn't be breaks at all, there absolutely should be, and we even ordered coffee and tea to make the breaks as comfortable as possible. I included some regular breaks, but when it came to (group) assignments like preparing an interview or drafting a poster, I encouraged the students to take their own breaks. I know that not all students were happy with this, but I fully take the responsibility for this deliberate decision. Pleasantly, there were way less debates and complaints about that than last class.

Reflection on the students:

I taught a very open minded, friendly and motivated group of students at different stages of their PhD research, some of them still at the very beginning, some of them further advanced. In this context, I

would like to recommend that the course should be only open to more advanced PhD students, because it builds on the students' own research and without yet having too many results, it is difficult to design the sort of output that is demanded in this class.

Unlike in last class, the assignments that the students submitted were on an almost evenly high level. Of course, there were again students who put lesser effort into it or were less capable of submitting high quality assignments, but I was surprised by the overall creativity and independence of this group! Most of them worked on their assignments with a concrete idea in mind of what to use it for. This is in sharp contrast to the last group, where lots of time was lost by discussions about the exact length of the articles, the "how to do it right" and the formalities on submission. This was not a "problem" at all with this group even though I don't think I did things too differently. The only reason I can imagine for this stunning difference is that I, after having gone through the class and the formal process once before, conveyed more authority and sovereignty and therefore the previous classes' level of uncertainty did not arise in first place. When it comes to independent working it must have either something to do with the Norwegian background of the participants or with the academic composition of the group, but I am glad to say that it went much more smoothly than last time!

What would I handle differently or do the same way

As I wrote, I will draw conclusions from my time management problems by putting stricter time limits to the students' contributions and feedbacks, doing some restructuring of the content, as well as by potentially taking part in a class about time management.

I will also think about how I can include a part on practical tips for independent speech and performance. But I also learned that the wishes of the class depend very much on its composition and I will therefore stick to some elements – like twitter or podcast – because I think they are important. That of course does not mean that I don't respect the students' input.

I was unsure if creating a poster draft within the short time of 60-90 minutes actually made sense. But the students liked the idea of presenting something unfinished to the class and I have to agree that it is important to learn sharing research work in the progress. I will therefore keep this element.

The students seemed to have enjoyed the feedback and I also want this to be a crucial element of next class, even though I can imagine that some students might perceive it as a waste of time. I am fully convinced that this is a great way of learning. I also organized the feedback on the popular articles differently this time, so that the students got a feedback partner assigned by me and therefore received feedback by their partner and by me. I got the feeling that this worked really well.

Overall, I am satisfied with how the course went, even though I still see room for improvement.

I have three specific suggestions for the course:

- An 80% mandatory attendance MUST be included in the course requirements. There is no penum to read at home and the course is based on participation.
- It should be considered to admit students who are more advanced in their PhD or to NOT admit those who just started.
- I can see that there probably are organizational issues, but the earlier the emne ansvarlige knows about the participants, the easier it is to customize the class.

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