

Report on SVF 8054 – Theory of Science Autumn 2021

Introduction

Last year's report has ended with the following conclusion:

“This year's experience, after the modifications mentioned above, makes me think that perhaps such a radical restructuring is not needed or at least it is not urgent. I would like to see how the modified course structure performs if, hopefully, we receive more students in the next academic year and the special circumstances will disappear or at least will be attenuated. I would postpone any further decision regarding the future of the course till then.”

As I will explain below, the modified course structure has continued to perform well this semester. COVID-19 was also much less a disturbing factor, although hybrid teaching – optional online participation – was maintained. I explain these and other findings below.

This year the structure of the course was further modified, although not radically (for details see attached course handbook):

- The lecture part of the course (the so-called common lectures or 'fellesundervisning) kept its three-day time slot, but more time was given (back) to IFF (two full days), while specialist teachers were also given a day to lecture and meet their students [last year the share was half-half between IFF and specialist teachers].
- The specialist lecturing was confined to the teacher's own groups [last year they lectured to everyone].
- The stand-alone first meeting with the specialist teachers was abolished.
- We kept from last year that the specialist seminars in each specialization had two full days the exact use of which were decided by the specialist teacher.
- Students were provided with a designated supervisor to help with the writing of their final essay (exam).

Unlike last year, COVID-19 has disturbed less the teaching. All sessions were held in person with digital attendance – via Zoom – as an option (hybrid teaching).

This year 23 students took the course, which is significantly higher than previous year's intake (9) but less than two years ago (34). 13 of these 23 students have filled in the evaluation form (see attached result sheet). This is a reasonable participation rate, probably we can consider the result representative – although the participation rate is lower than before (two years ago we had 23 out of 34, last year 6 out of 9).

Below I briefly describe the results of the received student feedback:

Common lectures

Last year we have begun the practice of sharing lecture time among the teachers and making more clear-cut who lectures to whom on what and when. This year we have continued this practice: Fredrik Nyseth continued to lecture from the IFF side for two full days and the last

day was given to specialist teachers to lecture to their own specialist groups. The positive experience from last year continued: 93% of students rated the lectures highly (4 or 5 out of 5), with only 7% giving a mediocre rating (3 out of 5). The lectures were also found to be not too difficult (70% of respondents rated the level of difficulty 3 out of 5) and the teachers are generally praised for their helpfulness (about 60% gave a 4 or 5 rating out of 5).

There are some critical remarks. These have mainly to do with the intensity of the lectures (primarily the IFF lectures, judging from students' text comments) and the denseness and amount of material covered (these issues influence less the overall rating and more the student-lecturer interaction rating). Since I was present in the IFF lectures, I can testify to this being a (smaller) problem: to lecture 8 hours for two full consecutive days is demanding both on the lecturer as well as on students. However, I do not consider this a major problem. I think in the future it can be overcome with less material being covered and more active forms of teaching (polls, group work, and so on). I would particularly commend Fredrik Nyseth for his high-quality lecturing who is often praised by the students in their comments.

Specialist seminars

These seminars have been, in my experience, a well-liked feature of the course and this year has been no exception. 85% of students gave high overall rating (4 or 5 out of 5), while the student-teacher interaction is rated even more highly (only 8 % of students gave 3 out of 5). The level of seminars is also considered appropriate (70%). As I noted in my previous reports, I think this is not surprising since the seminars provide material for the students in a given specialization (hence the problem of relevance does not normally arise) and they also provide forum for students to discuss their work and to receive targeted guidance and supervision. This, coupled with the teacher's ability and experience to interact with students, makes for a mutually satisfying teaching experience. There are very few critical remarks in the feedback results, all specialist teachers – Anniken Greve, Peter Svenonius, Håkon Leilufsrud – are mentioned by name and always positively. The perhaps one remark I thought is worth looking into in the future is that the specialist teaching did not connect well to the common lectures. Ideally, this should be avoided; however, such discrepancy is difficult to avoid given the rather different nature of the two parts of the course.

The course overall

This year the course received even higher evaluation than last year (which already marked a significant contrast with two years ago when I took over the course): 85% of students have rated the course highly (4 or 5 out of 5). The teachers have also been named at several points in a positive light. All responding students consider the course relevant for their studies and most of them would recommend the course to other students. It is clear from the student's text comments that most of them learnt a fair bit from the course and a lot of this helps them with their PhD work as well. I consider this a very positive outcome.

What is mentioned negatively, as already noted above, is the intensity and denseness of the common lectures (IFF): not the quality of the lectures, or of the lecturer, but simply the format. As I mention above, there are ways of dealing with this problem. Some students, partly on this ground, propose that we use less time for the common lectures. Another reason given is their preference for the specialist seminars. However, I am against this proposal. Students like the specialist seminars more in this respect because they work on their own

essays and material in a small-scale seminar setting. This is how it should be. At the same time, students also have to learn – as many of their positive remarks give away – the basics of the theory of science. To deliver this result we need to keep two days for the common lectures (IFF) since after this the specialist part of the course takes over. What we can do, as I already propose above, is to change the format of teaching away from pure passive lecturing to more active forms of teaching that involves but not exhausted by lectures to a (relatively) passive audience.

Other than this, there are no serious negative comments in the students' feedback. There are some complaints about timing and other practical matters, but it is virtually impossible to organize a course that fits every student's timetable and needs perfectly.

Proposal for the future of the course

Two years ago, I recommended a radical redesign of the course as a possible way forward. This and last year's experience makes me think that perhaps such a radical restructuring is not needed or at least it is not urgent. There are still some reasons counting in favour of a more compact, intensive version of the course, though, but any such reorganization would require significant effort from whoever takes over administration of this course in the future.

Tromsø, 18.11.2021

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Enclosed:

1. Result sheet for student evaluations.
2. Course handbook.