

Periodisk evalueringsrapport

NORAM 3500

This is the BA thesis course. It rotates amongst us and this semester was my turn. I consulted with both David Mauk and Mark Luccarelli about what they had done in the prior two years and used the exact same methodology and chose the same number of pensum articles from the same book as they had used. In fact, I used two of the same articles as David had used last time, and merely traded the third for another that I thought made for an easier and clearer comparison with the other two articles. If the complaints raised by a few students were also raised with my colleagues, we need to know that. If not, it is clearly personal and does not reflect the actual course readings, assignments and teaching.

The one thing I did differently, which they and the chair and the HF exam office knew about, was to add a small excerpt on plagiarism and require them to write a two paragraph definition of plagiarism illustrating the correct way to do a quote with a footnote, and a paraphrase. For their examples, they were allowed to use any of the pensum texts. I used the exact same assignment with all of my classes. If a student was in more than one class, they only needed to turn in one and it would count for all courses. I was open with the students that the reason for this was that in the prior semester, a full one-third of the students in the history course had plagiarized their essays, by cutting and pasting nearly every word and that this has been a growing problem. I said that my intent with the assignment was two-fold: first, so that they would learn how to cite sources properly and not plagiarize, and second, so that if they plagiarized anyway I could use their paragraphs to prove to the faculty that they did in fact know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, so that punishment from the faculty would be guaranteed. The requirement was that for this to be approved, this small item must be entirely correct.

It was very clear to me that the assignment was essential because when we went over the concept first in class, only one student in the course could come up with a proper paraphrase of something in the text. They needed it. Their examples of paraphrasing were simply cut and paste, but they thought merely writing it made it their own. This convinced me that we would have received a significant number of cut and paste jobs as theses, if I had not insisted that they had to learn about academic ethics.

As for the complaints raised about this, I cannot see that teaching students that they cannot cut and paste assignments at the BA thesis level is inappropriate. If they do not know, which is what each of those whom I have turned in during earlier semesters for plagiarizing have claimed, then it must become a conscious part of our teaching.

As for the students who think the evaluation form is inappropriate, the BA thesis course is defined as a research paper, not an exam. It is defined as requiring a godkjent essay, designed (by all of us) to teach them how to build an argument comparing sources. A two paragraph assignment teaching something as basic as plagiarism and how to paraphrase and quote is hardly excessive.

The more personal comments, I am certain, reflect anger about the plagiarism assignment. The additional assignments they refer to as not being valuable were merely steps along the way for the thesis: an introduction, an annotated bibliography, a tentative conclusion, an outline or plan for the paper. I had a significant number of students thank me for those deadlines and requirements for feedback. They said they would never have started as early or done as well without them. I believe that the value of these deadlines shows in the grading curve for the class, which is hardly the curve one would expect had the complaints of a few been an accurate assessment of the course or my teaching.

I also told the students that it was necessary to run the spell check and grammar check anytime they turned something in – after getting a lot of drafts that clearly showed a complete lack of concern with checking those things. I said that computers make it so easy to do, that turning in texts that are filled with simple spelling errors and basic grammar problems makes them look bad – as if they don't care about the impression they make. I did go on to say that they were finishing school and entering the job market, and that it was important for them to understand that such carelessness would mark them in a potential employer's mind as either lazy or incompetent. I stressed that the computer checkers would help them make a good impression throughout their careers -- with very little effort.

I met with every student a minimum of three times in my office. During these meetings, I worked with them until they understood about plagiarism, in addition to talking with them about argumentation on their essays, and helped them work out their research questions and plans, and ensured that they had an advisor lined up. Several who had other advisors continued to come to me to double check things or talk when they could not reach their advisor. Generally, these conferences were pleasant conversations.

In conclusion, any discussion of the work load should take into account the answers given by the students to question 2.1. This course is 10 points. As such, it is assumed that students spend 12.5 hours every week working on this course. Most of the students claim that they spent more time on this course than in other courses (questions 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3). Yet when asked in 2.1 how many hours per week they spent on the course, only two of the students used more than 10 hours per week.

Deborah Kitchen-Doderlein

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