Summary of course evaluation for BIOR69 Population and community ecology, autumn 2019

Main teacher: Stefan Andersson

Number of students: 38
Course score: 13 pass (G), 25 pass with distinction (VG)

I. Summary of the course evaluation
Number of answers: 26 (68%)

Mean score over students (maximum = 5, previous year’s score in parenthesis):
- Overall, I am satisfied with this course 4.3 (4.2)
- Teachers and assistants have motivated me and I received good help and feedback 3.9 (4.0)
- The communication with the teaching staff was good and I received clear information about the various course components 4.5 (4.3)
- The level of the course was appropriate 4.2 (4.2)
- My preknowledge was sufficient for the course 4.6 (4.4)
- The breakdown between different forms of learning activities was good 4.6 (4.7)
- I appreciated the course literature 4.3 (4.0)
- I appreciated the examinations employed for this course 4.1 (4.4)
- The course has increased my subject knowledge 4.3 (3.9)
- The course has also increased my ability to... communicate in writing 58%
communicate orally 62%
work in a group 77%
search and process information 56%
analyze and solve problems 65%
- During the course I have on average spent this many hours studying
  0-10 hr/week 0%
  10-20 hr/week 15%
  20-30 hr/week 15%
  30-40 hr/week 42%
  40-50 hr/week 19%
  > 50 hr/week 8%
- The work load during the course has been
  Low 12%
  Medium high 77%
  High 12%
- The work load during this course has been
  Evenly distributed 46%
  Fairly evenly distributed 50%
  Unevenly distributed 4%
- Have you experienced course literature, staff, teaching methods during the course to be discriminatory in any way (gender, ethnicity, etc.)? 17 answered "no"
Comments

Overall the students were satisfied with the course (mean score = 4.3) and most of the aspects covered in the evaluation form (mean score ranging from 3.9 to 4.6). According to the added comments, the students especially liked the excursion week (16 students), the mix of different teaching forms (lectures, seminars, exercises, field projects etc; 6 students) and the two projects, especially the group-based research project (5 students). The literature got a slightly better score this year (4.3 vs 4.0 in 2018), possibly because of changes made in the new updated edition of the main textbook (Mittelbach & McGill).

Considering the aspects that got the lowest scores (3.9-4.1) and the critical comments in the evaluations, there is clearly room for improvements. Several students wanted more feedback on the reports (13 students), to complement the comments and criticisms given by the fellow students (including the assigned "opponents") during the oral project presentations. The main teacher offers the opportunity to get individual feedback after the presentations but maybe this is insufficient (only a few students turn up). It is possible that we need to schedule specific sessions when such feedback is given (and perhaps make these sessions mandatory). Other students wanted more detailed information before the exams on the exact grading system for each exam answer and that the written reports are graded in a strictly quantitative manner so that the resulting scores can be directly added to the exam scores (8 students). Finally, there were students who thought (1) that the course could go deeper in several subject areas, (2) that the last exam (Writing a discussion) should cover more of the course contents (i.e. more than the particular subject of the article chosen for the discussion exam), (3) that we should avoid planning days with just lectures (done by necessity on two occasions), and (4) that it would be good to have a more detailed presentation of each new site during the field week so that it becomes easier to select projects to work on (fewer than 5 students per suggestion).

II. Comments from the teacher team

No specific comments from the other teachers, but personally, I think we need a better system of managing the field equipment in the storage rooms (repairing equipment, sorting stuff on the shelves, throwing away old equipment, replacing batteries in electronic devices, etc). It takes too much time to collect all the material needed for the field week.

III. Evaluation of changes made since the previous course

No major changes, except for some additional "deepening" of the course material in the form of one additional lecture (on mutualisms by Magne Friberg) and a two-hour extension with population dynamic modelling of both the predation and competition lecture (both by Jörgen Ripa). On the other hand, we removed one lecture on how to write an article discussion (used previously as a preparation for the last exam) - this information is now given at a specific occasion to all master students.

IV. Suggested changes for the next course

In view of the comments above (especially those in section I), I propose that we continue our work to deepen the course content. My suggestion is to add one exercise on statistics (perhaps by replacing one of the existing ones) at the community level (calculation of diversity indices, clustering and ordination analyses, etc). Community statistics is a natural part of the course subject area and experience thereof will be useful when students choose to do field projects involving ecological communities during the field week or in the final research project. We should also consider providing (1) more information beforehand on exactly how the results of the exams are graded (not a trivial task and will require some adjustment between years depending on the nature of the particular dataset and the article used in exam 1 and 2, respectively) and (2) more feedback...
on written reports and exam results (within the limits of time and resources set by the course budget and the large number of students considered).

Compiled by Stefan Andersson, 16 December 2019