Course evaluation GEOM09 (spring 2020)

Based on both the written reports and our personal impression, all students seem to greatly appreciate the course (in similarity with previous years). This achievement is particularly noteworthy because we swiftly had to convert the course into online teaching just a few days ahead of its start. However, although the transition from in-house to online teaching went surprisingly smooth, initially some issues emerged, as is obvious when reading the comments by the students. Most of these relate to the somewhat chaotic first days of the course, the cancelled excursions, and preferences regarding pre-recorded versus Zoom lectures. While we regret that no excursions were possible this year (due to the corona pandemic), there is no real consensus among the students regarding the lecture format. Given the situation, some students seem to favour pre-recorded PowerPoint lectures where they can go back and forward between slides; others seem to rapidly lose interest when on their own with pre-recorded lectures and instead favour scheduled Zoom lectures and the interactions that follow between the teacher and students. Thus, if we are ever again ‘forced’ to conduct this course online, a mixture of scheduled Zoom lectures and pre-recorded PowerPoint presentations seem to be the preferred format. Regarding the lectures, the overall impression is that they worked fine, although some perhaps were a bit lengthy and there also seem to have been some issues with the audio recordings. Likewise, most students seem to have been fine with the changed (online) format of the seminars.

The level of the course seems appropriate given the different study background of the students and the fact that they additionally originate from multiple countries. As last year, the individual project was introduced early in the course; however, one student comments that the work-load still is slightly biased towards the end of the course. Thus, for next year, we might consider scheduling the final presentations one week earlier in order for the students to be able to focus more on the final exam during the last course week. As with previous years, it seems as if we cannot stress enough (at the beginning of the course) that the students need to plan their time carefully and start early with the individual projects.

The guest lectures received mixed reviews, in part because of missing background knowledge on statistics by some students. Because we as in-house teachers see it as a good learning experience for the students to meet teachers from other departments and countries, we will ensure that that this issue is solved next year. We are further very pleased with the fact that the students have shown appreciation for the uniqueness of our course, and that they get to experience an unusually broad range of palaeontology-related topics and issues, including the cross-disciplinary exercise and lecture by Emma Hammarlund. Obviously, guest lectures are somewhat difficult to evaluate as we do not know what can be expected next year and which teachers will eventually participate. We do, however, hope to be able to continue with this teaching activity.

In summary, despite the unusual format that was ‘forced’ upon us this year, we feel reasonably pleased with the outcome of GEOM09. Hopefully, we will be back with in-house teaching and proper field excursions next year.

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Course evaluation 2020: GEOM09 (summary based on replies from 10 students)

1. How did you perceive the course in general (from 1-5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent)?
   (1) (2) (3) (4) 40% (5) 60%

2. How did you perceive the level of the course (from 1-5, where 1 is too simple and 5 is too difficult)?
   (1) (2) (3) 80% (4) 20% (5)

3. How easy was it to keep your level of interest up during the course (from 1-5, where 1 is difficult and 5 is easy)?
   (1) (2) 20%* (3) 30% (4) 40% (5) 10%

*Not course-related though, just because of circumstances.

4. Did you miss something on the course? If so, what?
   - I think all the most essential points of the course were realized.
   - The excursions but that wasn’t the teachers’ fault but instead the corona situation. It could have been interesting to have had a bit more focus on looking at fossils and trying to understand where they are in their decay process, so which parts have survived and been preserved and which haven’t. Since we talked briefly about this in the taphonomy experiment, so it would have been fun to look more in detail at fossils and try to decipher their decay history.
   - The field trips but that is due to the current pandemic.
   - Of course this was a ‘freak year’ so I won’t comment on the missed field trips but I do have one comment on the would-be visit to the Paleocraft company in Denmark: I am aside from geology the most interested in art so I was really looking forward to that excursion, so if you are planning to go there next year as well I might like to join that time! I know Per asked if it was okay to join the Gotland excursion next year and I believe that was okay as well so that is really nice.

5. How could we improve the course?
   - I don’t think you could’ve handled the course any better this year, and next year will be completely different from this year so it’s hard to really say something.
   - You could have a couple more lectures via zoom if you have a course online. It has been somewhat difficult to hold up the focus and interest when going through the recorded lectures and it has been easier with lectures via zoom. One thing that you could consider changing is to not have the individual project throughout most of the course but instead have shorter time for it and then have assigned days to work on it. Now, the work I did on the individual project got interrupted with other things we got to do, and it would have been better to be able to have more uninterrupted time dedicated for it. Since it is easier to get the paper done in that way.
   - The only problems I could identify with the course were to do with the fact that they were online (lectures being uploaded late, tasks being concentrated into the same timeframe), so hopefully they will be solved by next year!
   - More time only for studying for the exam - the end of the Individual Project should be a little earlier.
   - Since we only had online courses, maybe try for future online courses (you never know) to have zoom lectures instead of prerecorded ones.
   - Maybe, you can loosen the belt on May/June a bit? In some point in May, I think everyone was really busy. I know that the Easter break and a long weekend in the end of April had to be compulsory off, but April in comparison with May wasn’t busy at all.
   - I found it a little difficult to wrap my head around the content whilst relating it to time, it might have been nice to have learned the content in geological time order followed by the other non-geological time related ones.

6. Potential views on the lectures?
   - The lectures were very interesting and informative, and often a lot of fun!
   - They were good!
   - Really good and very interesting.
   - Lectures were good
   - I thought the lectures were good despite everything. PowerPoint lectures have their strengths in that you can go back and listen, while zoom-lectures were better for maintaining some form of schedule. I do think the PowerPoint lectures have an advantage in these times though because if it is hard to focus you can repeat the lecture again.
   - Mats and Randolph’s recorded lectures were sometimes a bit long, they would probably have worked better if they were in person instead, but they would have been better as a recorded version if they were a bit shorter. The lectures were otherwise really good. The lecture with Christian was a bit messy but it was fun to have time where we discussed questions in groups and you could do the same in other lectures, to easier keep the focus of the students during lectures.
Lectures 1-2 were very late, maybe it would have been better to upload them without the voice first and then if needed add recordings later. There was already a lot of text in the slides so it would have been enough to understand. This is very important at the beginning of the course. Since there was so much text in the slides, I think it might have been better to do them through zoom. On the other hand, the very first zoom meeting might have been chaotic. Without the excursion paleobotany lecture felt too short. The exercise after “Lect. 27: A revolution in the Paleozoic environment?” was confusing. We did not have the required knowledge of statistics. I did not fully understand the main message which we were supposed to get out of the exercise.

Some of the lectures were poorly recorded and were incomprehensible.

7. Potential views on the labs and seminars?

• I thought the exercises and seminars were good.
  • Very good
  • No complaints: we all knew what was expected of us and I did not feel like they were too much.
  • I think all four seminars were very valuable. Taphonomy experiment was simple, but very good idea.
  • Seminars 1-3 felt more like exercises. I got less out of them than I would have if we had zoom meetings. It was sad to know that our tank (black tank) was not anoxic. If I was happy that we still had labs in Geocentrum, made studies less monotonous.
  • The labs and seminars were also interesting. It may have been good to spread them out a bit more over the course (again this may be due to distance learning), as the seminars at least were all concentrated at the beginning of the course.
  • Seminars were good, but the taphonomy lab felt quite forced. I don’t know if I actually learned something important that I can take with me at all. I know it was supposed to be some other lab, but it would have been better to skip this one in my opinion.
  • Labs were interesting. Earlier seminars would have been better through zoom, like the later ones were.

8. Potential views on the excursions?

• It was fun to explore the room that has boxes full of rocks from Gotland. I think we learnt a lot from each other (safe distance) during that time.
  • I wish we could have gone on them as they seemed very interesting.
  • Our covid-19 excursion was special, but still it was good to hear about these places.

9. Other issues?

• This course took more than fulltime studies, maybe it was because of the corona situation but you could consider taking something away from the course.
  • I just wanted to comment that my level of interest during the course kept shifting from close to 1 all the way to 5. The reason for going down was all the time that was spent alone watching pre-recorded lectures unable to see anyone. Reasons for it going up are a bit more complicated but a big part of it was the motivation that I received from you.
  • It was a bit funny/sad when at the end of the course during the zoom meeting (for the exam) I saw some of the teachers for the first time.
  • Question 17 of the exam (the tick boxes, if you answered incorrect you would lose marks) was a bit too ‘evil’ in my opinion, that could be removed for next year. I would have preferred just a regular type question.
  • The amount of e-mails that were sent out often became difficult to keep track of and I forgot/missed information sometimes. It was necessary of course but perhaps there can be some other system that can solve this better.

10. Corona-induced online studies 2020: Please provide your thoughts on the online teaching of 2020. What worked, what did not work, what should teacher’s think about, etc. Basically whatever comes to mind and that you wish to report to us.

• I’m impressed, how fast everyone of you adapt to on-line teaching, what wasn’t easy, but I think everything worked pretty well!
  • For us everything worked mainly because we are few students I think. I can see how it is more difficult with larger classes though.
  • I have written about the problems in previous answers. I thought it was good that we had weekly meetings since we got an easy way to contact you about potential problems. I think that the online studies in general have worked fine, but it was harder to stay motivated compared to have lectures at Geocentrum.
  • I think that starting the course through a zoom meeting would have been great, I missed that during the first day. I really did not expect that lectures will be pre-recorded. It was a pleasant surprise that made watching them less boring and, in some way, I was able to get to know the teachers at least a little bit. I think you did a really good job as course leaders coping with the situation. This course will remain as an interesting memory and a good example on how to deal with such extreme
situations. I was really looking forward to the Gotland excursion. Even when you said (very early) that it will be changed to Denmark, I was “oh no…” And then it got cancelled completely.:((

•As said previously, it’s really hard to concentrate with the prerecorded lectures. Sometimes I found myself zooming out and then having to listen all over again to the whole slide. It took a lot of energy and time to get through one lecture. This led to me being far behind on the lectures and having to spend most of my weekends trying to keep up on top of having personal issues that I had to take care of as a foreigner and exchange student. But the zoom lecturers were excellent really interesting and they helped a lot with understanding the content of course since we had the possible interaction with the teacher if we are confused.

•What worked: The PowerPoints with the recorded voice! I really enjoyed that. Although I wish there was a way to change the playback speed but that’s out of your control. My brain goes really fast so it would be perfect if there was like a 2x speed option. All the seminars and exercises were handled very well. I agreed with all the deadlines. What did not work: Lectures through zoom were not my favorite, I found it harder to concentrate since I can’t really sit still in front of my pc for more than an hour just listening. With the recorded lectures I could always take a break whenever I felt like it.

•The lectures were good but found that the prerecorded ones took much longer to go through than zoom lectures. Zoom lectures were good especially when they were also recorded. Due to the unavoidable time taken for the prerecorded lectures to be made, this confused the timescale and often made it so that we had repeated periods of having very little work followed by periods of very high workload. It sometimes also meant that we received lectures that related to seminars after the seminars were due. The fish experiment worked especially well. The zoom seminars for the individual projects worked fine. The Friday zoom meetings were good.