Global Issues in Fisheries and Wildlife

Date: Summer 2011, Spring 2012, Summer 2013
Location: UK, MSU campus, UK (respectively)

Introduction

I had the opportunity to serve as the program coordinator/instructor for the inaugural cohort of *Environmental Science, Policy, and Criminology in Scotland and England*, the teaching assistant for FW 481 (Global Issues on Fisheries and Wildlife), and the program coordinator/instructor for the second cohort of *Environmental Science, Policy, and Criminology in Scotland and England*. For the study abroad program, I assisted with all of the courses offered but held an instructor role in:

- ANR 475: International Studies in Agriculture and Natural Resources (2011, 2013)
- ISB 202: Applications of Environmental and Organismal Biology (2011)

Reflections

I recently received an email from a former student reflecting upon the program in which he was a participant, two years prior. He had enjoyed the study abroad experience while he was in the UK, but he said that he only recently realized (2+ years later) what an impact the program had on his education and also his worldview. It’s affirmation that I can have a positive impact on others through education.

In preparing for a course lecture or activity, I aim at a learning outcome. During the program/course, I can assess if students learned from the experience. But, after that, it is really beyond my control. That’s why emails like this one are so exciting to see.

Like this student, reflecting upon my own experiences with the same program and on my other teaching experiences, I agree that perspective comes with time. *Looking back, what is it about teaching that I enjoy? Why do I want to teach?* I think it really is the excitement of seeing students grasp a concept—put to and two together and take ownership of it themselves. I feel a sense of pride and gratification for being able to help them along in this process. Often times, it’s them helping me make those connections too. And what’s even more rewarding is to get an email like that one from a former student, learning that an experience from some time ago can have such a transformative impact.

Ultimately, I hope to impart on others what inspiring teachers have imparted on to me. A sense of wonder, a sense of drive, a sense of ambition to achieve. I recognize that I’m a product of nurturing learning environments and I wouldn’t be where I am today without mentors and teachers that have encouraged me.

Teaching, consequently, is a great responsibility – preparing the future generations – and thinking of it that way is very daunting for me. I used to think that was because I was a novice, now I aim to always have a healthy awareness of that responsibility. It’s a task that I never want to take lightly.

I have much to learn, from educators and from my students directly. Reviewing my own teaching evaluations and reflecting critically upon my teaching experiences, I need to trust
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myself a bit more to the process. I find the most effective teaching cannot be completely structured. I have to become more comfortable with what my role should be in the process. Students need to drive the lessons and I need to be there to guide them on the route. I can build the framework, provide the objectives, and tailor learning methods to help them reach the goals. I believe students learn best if they are taught to learn rather than taught information. But, I am still learning how to teach this way.

From my own observations in classrooms and other learning environments, the best teachers teach from behind. By that I mean that they are skilled enough to read the classroom and tailor their lessons to the needs of the students. They have a lesson plan and objective but are flexible and can modify their approach because they engage their students as individuals rather than anonymous “empty vessels” to be filled with their course content.

All these great professors have different strategies: name cards to call on students by name, walking around the room, group questions or “easy” questions to start discussions, pair work to build confidence before full class discussions, and countless others. As a new instructor, I’ve been trying to collect these strategies by observing these role model professors and apply them in my own classroom experiences. For example, I’ve used problem-based learning, case-studies, and jig-saw approaches to structure different lectures. I am definitely still in the process of figuring out what my teaching style will be and I find it helpful to attend workshops and observe in the classroom to gain “tools” for my teaching toolbox. But, I imagine that will be constantly evolving over the course of my career, anyways!

I also need more practice applying different techniques depending on the learning environment. Being flexible in the classroom is important, if for example, the projector doesn’t work. But, being flexible in an experiential learning environment is a whole different level. There’s just something about tramping a group of students through an unfamiliar landscape in the rain with stinging nettles, trying to give a lecture on the impacts of agricultural modifications to ecosystems, after getting lost on the way to the site. Teaching definitely takes me out of my comfort zone. I’ve had to learn to be more adaptable and resilient to these sorts of unexpected events. When there is a full class of students depending upon you, there really isn’t any other choice!

Conclusions

Reflecting on my early career teaching experiences, especially compared with the observations of professors I hope to emulate, it is clear that I still have a lot to learn. But, even from the limited experiences I have had, I am inspired by the students and feel fulfilled by this important work. I recognize the massive responsibility of this work and strive to continually improve my ability to engage students and teach them to think for themselves. I realize this will not be simple, but just one student making the connection between topics or one email from a former student is enough to make it all worth it.