

TEACHING STATEMENT

Nadine Heck

As an avid learner myself, I want to spark students' passion for learning new ideas and concepts the same way I was inspired by teachers who were able to pass their passion for their subject on to me. Scientific knowledge in environmental geography and natural resource management is built to a great extent on the curiosity about interactions between nature and society and the questions and critical reflections that follow. My primary goals as a teacher are to deepen students' understanding about human-nature interactions, to provide students with the necessary methodological skills and scientific literacy to address complex socio-ecological issues, and to foster an inherent confidence in students to develop their own knowledge through critical thinking.

I highly enjoy working with students at different academic levels and always received positive feedback on my teaching from both students and my advisors. During my PhD, I worked as a teaching assistant in two classes, 'Climate Change and Society' and 'Analytical Skills in Physical Geography'. I was involved in practical classes and marking of students' assignments. At Cornell University, I had the opportunity to give a guest lecturer on marine governance in 'Society and Natural Resources'. In addition, I developed a new course 'Current perspectives of marine conservation' that I will teach in the spring 2014 at Cornell University. I am also engaged in the Human Dimensions Graduate Student Seminar at the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell University that provides M.S. and Ph.D. students the opportunity to get feedback and advice on their research progress. I deeply value teaching and mentoring students as I see the potential in individual students and take pride in contributing to their knowledge development. At the same time, I learn from my students myself and ask for students' feedback on my classes to continuously improve my teaching approach and design of my courses.

Teaching approaches

In order to have fruitful discussions, I believe that students first need to have a solid understanding about the topic under discussion and aim to use a mix of more formal lectures and reading and student discussions and teamwork assignments on associated topics. I apply a combination of theory and methodological approaches followed by examples of research application or personal fieldwork experiences. In my opinion, a solid knowledge about methods and theories is essential and will be useful to students in the future irrespective of their particular discipline. At the same time, following up with examples of applied research makes theories more tangible and deepens the understanding of how different methods are applied in real-life situations. I believe that such an approach helps to transfer abstract concepts to real life situations and actual problem- solving.

One of the key challenges in natural resource management is the diverse disciplinary background of students. As in other academic disciplines, diversity is also reflected in other ways such as aptitude for science, cultural background, and learning style. In order to foster an inclusive learning environment, I use peer learning and interactive classroom techniques such as group discussions and working groups. These approaches provide opportunities for students to learn from each other and to reflect more critically about the topic at hand and their personal views.

I aim to provide students with the opportunity to lead discussions on noteworthy themes natural management and to engage in debates in which they must argue for a particular side. Students then not only gain knowledge about a certain topic, but also learn to present concepts in an understandable manner and to tap other students' insights as a source of knowledge and understanding. Another teaching method I value is peer-reviewed learning among students. By exchanging papers among pairs of students, students learn to critically examine the work of others, even if it is on an unfamiliar topic. At the same time, students learn to take critical advice into consideration for their own work. Techniques such as individual research projects allow students at a more advanced level in their studies to develop their own research projects, to collect and analyze data, and to synthesize results in a scientific manner.

I also encourage students to reflect on their learning experience in the class. Getting students' input at the beginning of the term and throughout the course allows incorporation of their interests in the syllabus through case studies, illustrative examples of theories, and group assignments. This approach keeps students interested in the course content and involves them actively in the design of the course.

Assessment of learning

In my experience, a clear outline of the course and its requirements provides a useful roadmap that scaffolds the learning experience and helps students to understand where they need to go and how to get there. I like to use a combination of written and oral assessments. Written assignments such as case study analysis, reflection of reading material on a certain topic, or answering specific questions related to the topic at hand provide valuable means to provoke critical thinking and synthesizing knowledge on specific topics in natural resource management and geography. Written assignments are further invaluable to foster academic writing, to learn how to synthesize scientific literature in a well-structured argument, to present ideas and thoughts in a clear and structured format within a given word or page limit, and to learn about ethics in writing.

Oral assignments such as individual or group presentations, and leading discussions about a specific theme provide students with critical leadership skills that will be useful for their future regardless of the discipline or career they will be pursuing. Learned skills include presenting material in an approachable and engaging way, learning to talk in front of a group, keeping a group discussion on topic, and reflecting on the topic via follow-up questions.

Outlook

Ultimately, I want to spark students' curiosity about their environment and to give them the necessary skills to excel in their career, whether this is going to be in natural resources management, geography, or another discipline. I also want to provide a truly engaging and supportive learning environment. A teacher once told me that no question is stupid and I want my students to feel free to ask or answer any question without worrying about being judged.