

Supporting Biodiversity, Supporting Each Other

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Supporting Biodiversity, Supporting Each Other

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“Hope is a muscle that allows us to connect” - Björk

I’ve learned many things about teaching during the pandemic, from my students, from my research, and from my family. Some involve the value of community, the need for compassion, and the importance of hope.

For me, even in a home with other people, parts of the pandemic were profoundly lonely. The lack of small social interactions, and especially social affirmations, took a toll. One of my sons, upon the third (or millionth) time he was sent home for remote schooling, came to me in tears, saying that online school made him feel bad about himself. I knew what he meant, and I could see my own (university) students struggling too. During meetings, they seemed nervous, scattered, and often told me they couldn’t get any work done. Remote learning options offer opportunities to increase access to learning and build inclusive groups of learners. To me, however, they lack the social interactions and sense of community inherent in in-person learning. In response to these experiences, and to help myself as well as my students, I have made community-building and interaction an even bigger part of what I try to do in my classrooms and ask for as much participation as possible, even online. I now feel like I am meeting learning objectives when I see students ask each other out to lunch or discuss plans to study together.

Due to the lack of community, the uncertainty, disappointment, and true tragedy that many people experienced—and continue to experience—during the pandemic, I have also tried to increase the compassion and flexibility I offer my students. I’m not sure I’ve gotten this right yet; it feels like a moving target. I worry about developing a reputation for being “soft,” for giving easy extensions and the like. I have many colleagues who have begun to take away some supports (such as lecture recordings) as the pandemic eases, arguing that they aren’t good for students, but I’m not so sure about that. I’m struggling to tease apart what we do because our pride is involved, what we do because it creates an environment that optimizes learning, and even what we do to make our classrooms positive places to spend time. For now, the students are expressing the need for compassion and extra support, so I’ll try to extend it to them.

In teaching about conservation, hope can sometimes seem to be in short supply. In the last few years, my students seem to be feeling almost apocalyptic about the environment and the future of biodiversity, and I don’t blame them. But I also think that if I want to foster a sense of biodiversity and ecosystem stewardship in my students, I can’t be hopeless. I’m obsessed with how and why people care about biodiversity. My students and I have been running experiments to see what kinds of messaging encourages people to care and act on behalf of endangered species. For example, we’ve been making videos with positive or negative tones and seeing how viewers respond. One result we’ve seen repeatedly is the importance of positivity. Our “positive” videos make people more hopeful, and people who are more hopeful trust the information we provide more and are more likely to donate to the featured endangered species. I’m trying to apply these results beyond outreach



videos. I am increasingly shifting my tone away from the doom-and-gloom messaging common in conservation and instead focusing on bringing enthusiasm, a sense of wonder, and positivity to my teaching.

Just as adversity and new selection pressures can drive evolutionary innovations, I'm hoping that teaching through the pandemic will ultimately lead me to become a better teacher. These lessons were likely waiting for me already, but I have them in my pocket now. As I move forward, I will keep the need for connection, support, and positivity at the front of my mind.

Beyond “Zoom Sucks”: Environmental Studies and Sciences, Fieldwork, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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In the discipline of environmental studies and sciences, fieldwork is central. For many educators and researchers, there is a belief that, at the core, one can't deeply understand a place without spending time in and collecting data in the field. So when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, there was rightful widespread lamentation of the inability to conduct fieldwork. Academics argued that undergraduates wouldn't learn data collection techniques or connect with fellow students. Graduate students' academic work was stalled, with vaccine access privileging some and not others. Researchers' long-term projects were interrupted. Further, there was a fear that if faculty taught too effectively remotely, funding for field work would be pulled. While faculty did their best to adapt, there was communal grumbling just below the surface. On social media, a prominent conservation biologist simply stated, “zoom sucks”.ⁱ

There is a robust literature on how to make distance teaching and learning achieve academic objectives and facilitate student success. At its best, distance teaching and learning is a tool for overcoming inequity and access. For many working parents, caregivers, and the differently-abled, days or weeks in the field is a non-starter. Further, there are real risks to particular groups, such as those who identify as women, when in remote locations. Distance teaching and learning can reduce the “friction of distance”ⁱⁱ between students and the education they want. Having caregiving responsibilities or being differently-abled should not be barriers to achieving success and furthering progress in environmental fields of study.

Further, we need to challenge the idea that distance teaching and learning inherently inhibits connection, either to a place or one another. During the pandemic some faculty reported feeling more connected with their students and colleagues because of the ease of online interaction, even half-jokingly reporting that they had time to hike (and hence “connect with nature”) during what were previously commuting hours (Quay et al. 2020).

ⁱ Given that this individual's social media platform is private, we have not cited their quote directly.

ⁱⁱ The origin of this term is unknown, but it is a core principle in the field of economic geography: “As the distance from a point increases, the interactions with that point decrease, usually because the time and costs involved increase with distance.” (Oxford Dictionary of Geography, 2009).

