

I finally have a few seconds to record my thoughts on my TA experience from the Fall semester General Ecology class.

Recall that I was not a full TA; I was fulfilling a 1 credit education requirement within the department of Natural Resources. I attended weekly TA meetings and helped Laura and Sandra instruct the Thursday morning lab.

>From my perspective, many of the students were tense, anxious and discontented in the first half of the semester. Toward the end of the semester, I felt that most of the students were working hard and enjoying themselves. The change, I believe, was due to the TA's changing their approach to clearly separate the class into two sections: ecology and Stata.

Stata is not a normal Macintosh software program where there is a steep learning curve and users are fairly comfortable after a few days of trial and error. In my opinion, the students, at the end of the semester, were still very unconfident with regard to Stata. Because it is Unix-based program, it is not intuitive at all. You have to use it for a long, long time or you have to have a manual in front of you. The students are not in either of these positions.

To deal with this, Sandra and Laura had to put in a lot of extra hours going over the manual and anticipating all the problems that might come up with Stata. They would then call these potential pitfalls out in the lead-off. Before talking about these pitfalls, they would lecture on the ecology of the lab. What's the point? What are we trying to do? How do we use Stata as a tool to test our hypotheses?

Earlier in the semester, Stata and ecology were presented as if the two subjects were necessarily intertwined, giving the impression that someone who couldn't handle Stata couldn't handle ecology. (I hope this isn't the case because then I'll never be able to handle ecology.) Earlier in the semester, I heard comments like: "I have no idea what I'm doing and I just want to get out of here." and "Why are we doing this? I have no idea what the point of this is."

By the end of the semester, Laura and Sandra had put in place a few structures that turned this around. Students were actively discussing ecology in groups, instead of sweating through the exercise as fast as possible and bolting out the door. One of these lectures was presented in the following fashion:

- 1) These are the ecological concepts we'll be dealing with today.
- 2) These are the activities that we will be engaging in to test some hypotheses.
- 3) These are the statistical tests we will employ.
- 4) These are the pitfalls you may encounter while using Stata.

Also, Laura and Sandra came up with discussion questions for the groups, which they had to answer and relate to one of the TAs before moving on to the next section of the lab. This worked very well.

I hope this helps. I was happy to be a part of the group this semester. It was a real learning experience. Contact me if you need any other information.

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