

Reflections on teaching Evolution 278 Track 2 -- Writing-in-the-Majors Section

Teaching this course was a true pleasure. The students were on the whole enthusiastic and hard working. I have learned a lot about teaching from this course -- particularly how to get discussions going. There were some students who participated relatively little in larger class discussions, and apart from calling on them by name, I wasn't able to change that much. However, those students did seem to participate more when we broke up into smaller groups.

The course was particularly satisfying because I believe my students really learned a lot and, perhaps more importantly, got excited about the subject. On the last day of class, at David Takacs' suggestion, I asked them to write down the most important (or memorable or fascinating) thing they learned this semester. Then we talked about what they had written. Their answers were great! Genetics and microbiology majors talked about how they used to see evolution as just another small subject within biology and that now they understand that in many ways it encompasses many of the different fields of biology. Other people spoke of how much they learned from being asked to think critically about controversial subjects instead of being force fed "the facts." I think Sara tried to teach the rest of the sections to do the same, but only in track 2 did the students really have the time and opportunity to read primary literature and grapple with the controversies on their own.

If I were to teach this again I would structure the writing assignments differently. As it was, the students wrote 4 papers -- one 1-2 pages, and the rest 4-6 pages. For the first three, I gave out specific essay assignments, and for the last, they chose their own topic. I think more shorter papers (perhaps 6 - 2 page papers?) would have been better in terms of covering more topics, and in terms of getting more practice writing. Also, I think a mixture of assigned essays and self-determined topics would be good. The assignments help them learn to think about how to approach the issues and ensure that they learn about a particular subject, but they restrict creative thought to some degree. When choosing their own topics, the students own ideas are able to come through. The risk is that the papers will be vague or inappropriate. A mixture of both methods throughout the semester might help the students to make connections between their own ideas and interests and the subjects of the course.

Another change I would make if I were to teach a V;IM course again is to focus more on the peer review process. I think the students got a lot out of it, but that they could get so much more. Once I was working with a student to try to get him to focus his paper more, and he said something about how the paper he reviewed that time around had the same lack of focus, but that since his lacked focus, he didn't feel justified criticizing his peer-review partner. I think I should have spent more time encouraging the students to take a more critical (but still gentle) approach to the peer reviews. I should have made it explicit that they are expected to point out things even if they themselves made the same mistakes.

Something I found particularly difficult about the course was grading. Some students were more experienced and brighter and did well without trying, while others wrote draft after draft of their papers and the final product still wasn't very good. I wanted to reward the people that worked so hard, but I don't know to what degree that is appropriate. In general, I found grading difficult, and I was rarely pleased or comfortable with my decisions. It might be helpful if grading were brought up during the course for TAs of WIM sections.

Thank you for the opportunity to teach this course! It was a fantastic experience.

