

Evaluations from Botany, fall 2003

Self-assessment

Things I liked:

I think one of my greatest assets in the course was my willingness to try different things when previous methods did not seem to be working. I did much more of this in the latter half of the semester, but I think that might have effectively “rescued” some of my students. I tried asking many different types of questions on exams, giving weekly quizzes (I started out with the idea of giving one practice quiz), writing my own lab manuals weekly (after the first two labs, I hardly used the canned manual I had chosen). I also tried giving them copious comments on all assignments. I found that the text and lab manual did not prioritize information, but instead presented minutia and important concepts in a confusing and tangled way. I used figures from the book in lectures so students could refer to them, but used lectures to help them prioritize information, concentrating on a few major concepts while doing away with minutia as much as possible (I also put all of my lectures up on the web after I gave each one). From the start, I tried to run active lectures, taking frequent breaks to ask students to discuss questions in groups or with their neighbors, then discussing their answers before proceeding (see reflections, and teaching statement). I also brought in many plants from the Duke greenhouses (as well as found/purchased plant materials, and prepared slides from Guilford), to show them examples of several trends in plant evolution.

Things I did not like:

This was a great but difficult experience for me. I had about a month to prepare to teach the course. I looked through 3 or 4 textbooks, choosing one that I thought was not too technical, and that covered the importance of botany to humans in a decent way. In hindsight I would have looked harder for a better text, and I would not have used the canned lab manual at all. I also waited too long to evaluate the students (with the first and only scheduled quiz). I believe that one of my greatest challenges is knowing how much to expect from students (especially continuing education students)—how to assess adequately what they know coming into the course, so I can avoid presenting too much material, or material that is too far from their understanding levels (which was difficult because the level of students’ previous education widely varied). I consistently received criticism for grading too harshly, and in some cases, this may be well founded. I want students to think for themselves, so I do not want to give away answers in the questions I write, but I certainly need to continue to work on asking more effective questions.

What students said:

Eighteen students finished and evaluated the course (out of 25 who had originally enrolled). By far, the biggest complaint about the course was that the lectures were long and the course covered too much material (seven). Fourteen said that I was very available and responsive to their concerns, despite that I was not living locally (although one other student said I was “not welcoming” to their concerns). Four of them said they liked my teaching style, and that I cared for them and how much they learned, and ten commented that my enthusiasm and/or knowledge was a positive thing. One third of

them mentioned that I improved as the course went on (none mentioned that I got worse). Half of my students thought I clearly presented information in lecture, but three were equivocal, three said I went through information too quickly, and one said they did not like my lectures. Eleven of them really liked the labs, although three of these students specifically mentioned that they liked them better after I started writing them—three said that they did not like the labs. Eleven students thought I was either fair or difficult but fair in my grading and evaluations of their work. Two said I was not fair, and four said my grading was too harsh or that questions I posed on quizzes and exams were too difficult or confusing. Two students commented that they did not like my style of answering questions with questions (my attempt to lead students to figure things out for themselves—I think sometimes I did not use this method effectively.). Three students wanted a better textbook.

Quotes from students:

“The thing I liked the most about this course was Tracy himself. I just like him as a person. He genuinely cared if we learned, and also his enthusiasm was apparent at all times. I didn’t necessarily enjoy the subject, but he usually made it interesting, if not entertaining.”

“stop answering a question with a question. Just say ‘you can find the answer in the book’ or ‘you should really know this’... but asking a series of questions makes the person fearful of asking questions.”

“If Tracy maintains his enthusiasm and love of the subject matter but tones down the expectations on an introductory class-he will become a great teacher.”

Was the teacher responsive to concerns?

“yes, but did at times act frustrated by our frustrations and concerns. Tracy is very intelligent and knows and has known material so well that it was difficult for him to dumb himself down for a 100-level class” ... “ nothing much was absolute. Everything was subjective. Class on 100-level should not be in that category. You can(not) apply material you don’t have a grasp on—I never felt like (on quizzes and exams) I knew what he was asking for.”

“increased knowledge of plants helps understand about plants in and around the house and helps explain things about plants much better to kids and friends—wider appreciation as well” ...”teacher did an excellent job at responding to the concerns of the students and changing testing format and lab structure and helping us to understand material better”

“grading, tests and writing assignments seemed too advanced for a 100-level class”