

Evaluations from Organismal Evolution, Spring 2004

Self-assessment

Things I liked:

I have taught a version of a diversity course three times. A professor once told me that he needed to teach a class at least three times to do it well. I feel the same way—I think I have learned tremendously from teaching this repeatedly. I felt that this time I had a chance to be more creative in my teaching, and more relaxed in my level of comfort with the material. Thus, I think my presentations were clearer overall than with courses I am teaching for the first time. I also tried to take with me lessons I learned from teaching the botany class the semester before, working to word questions more carefully and to make my grading schemes even more transparent.

One other consideration, for better or for worse, is that I did not design the course as a whole, and I designed only one of the labs (the Arthropod lab). Thus, I was responsible in a limited way for the material presented in classes and for evaluating student work. I feel like I have gained so much from TAing courses at Duke (whether or not I would end up doing things the same way myself—often I would)—courses here are really well designed for the most part, and I felt like I had several opportunities to help develop the course.

Things I did not like:

As with the botany class, I wrestle with how much to expect from students, how to effectively use the Socratic method in class and lab, and how to grade fairly. Students said my class was the most difficult section, and actually, grades for my section ended up being curved up the most in the end.

I always try not to leave students hanging, completely without answers to their questions. Many times students would figure things out for themselves, but there were probably cases where they did not, and may have felt like I did not address their questions.

Sometimes there was so much material to cover in a lab that I ended up helping students to walk through the material, pointing out important things as I went. Although I feel that this guided-tour style lab is probably not as effective as a lab where students are allowed to explore on their own much more, several students (four-six out of 16) felt frustrated by the latter method, and wanted more guided labs, because they felt like they missed several important pieces of information or features of organisms when left to explore on their own. Even when leaving students “on their own,” I would circulate among student groups constantly, trying to encourage them to see and understand the most important concepts in the labs, and asking questions that I hoped would lead them to figure things out.

In hindsight, I would have allowed students to come up with their own guidelines for presentations (each student gave one during the semester)—then I think the students would have owned them more—two students commented that they wanted more structure regarding their class presentations.

What students said:

Sixteen students were in my section. Four commented on my enthusiasm, and five on my knowledge of the material as a positive thing. The biggest complaint about the course is that the labs were too long (eight students). Four said that I should have guided labs more, and two said that the labs should have been more structured. Three said there was too much information in labs. One student wanted more hands-on activities.

Prior to each lab, I gave a brief introduction outlining the major themes in the lab, how this information fits into the big picture of organismal evolution, and drew parallels with material in the lecture. Eleven students liked my pre-lab lectures, and three pointed to some lack of clarity. Two students mentioned that they liked the Arthropod lab.

Thirteen students said I was responsive to their concerns, and available (with one additional guarded yes, and one student who said I was not responsive).

Three students said I was fair, and three more said I was difficult but fair. Seven students commented that I gave the most difficult quizzes of any section (but one said they learned more from that). Two students said I graded unfairly, or that quizzes were unnecessarily difficult.

Quotes from students:

“...the TA was very helpful, and considerate and accommodating”

“Approachable TA who was concerned with our understanding of the material”

“I enjoyed the pace at which the lab was taught, I felt like I was able to absorb a lot of material.”...”I wish the labs were more structured, I think it would have been better if the TA led the majority of the time, especially during very long labs because I felt like I missed stuff that I was expected to see, but I didn’t know I had to see it.”

“(Labs were) too long, not enough time to go through everything... but learned a lot from TA”

“lab introductions were effective overall. To the point, straightforward”

Was your work evaluated fairly?

“compared to each other, yes; compared to other sections, we were graded much more harshly—hopefully this will be fixed by the curve.”