

I am an engaging teacher for two reasons: I create a learning environment that a student would not have experienced otherwise, through an engaging, inquiry-based approach; and I bring together a diversity of learners through inclusivity, critical discussions, and introspection. My teaching philosophy is to foster rigorous curiosity and critical thinking, essential qualities for environmental problem-solvers.

My classroom is dynamic, filled with active debates and student-led discussions. I break up my lectures with group exercises and short student presentations to encourage critical discussions of content, as a mechanism for ongoing evaluation of understanding, and to allow student voices to co-produce the learning experience. For example, in my Sustainable Development I assign a student leader for each reading. This gives discussion leaders the opportunity to take ownership over their learning, and encourages their peers to engage as future and past discussion leaders. It also hones oral communication, leadership, and listening skills. Student feedback for this active environment is very enthusiastic, as are faculty observations. In fact, I taught an evening course and earned a standing ovation for my efforts to keep class engaging through each 3.5-hour session.

I believe inquiry-based or project-based learning is highly effective for students of the environmental. I use backwards design to define learning outcomes within lessons and across each course, and communicate these goals through audio, visual, discursive, and literary methods to build informational “scaffolding” in a learner’s mind. I then ask students to synthesize this information through inquiry-based activities. For example, I taught a workshop at the University of California Santa Cruz designed to reduce attrition of transfer students as they transitioned to a four-year university. It began with a short introduction to policy options to tackle invasive species and a quick course in population modeling using an excel function. We then gave each group real population data for a single invasive species and a hypothetical management budget. The students successfully completed a highly challenging population modeling activity over two days; a feat normally accomplished over three weeks of lecture and lab work. Workshop feedback was incredibly positive and I spoke with several transfer students who felt as if they were beginning their time at UC Santa Cruz with a success already under their belt.

I plan my curriculum to ensure that my course reflects a diversity of content and experiences, reaching across categories of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. I do this by carefully choosing course readings, offering a variety of perspectives on natural resource management, and exploring the dominant and alternative aspects of international development. For example, in my Gender and Natural Resource Management Capstone course, I designed an in-class activity to “justify gender” in a hypothetical World Bank development project. First, students learn about intersectional experiences of poverty, including often overlooked aspects that interplay with per capita income, such as age, ability, and gender. Groups are then given a budget, timeline, and objective: to increase a village’s access to the global rice market. Finally, students have to justify to what extent gender balance is a project priority and why. Should they train female village leaders? Gather sex-disaggregated data? Students have told me how much they enjoy the activity, and that it helped them see resource use through an intersectional lens. The exercise also cultivates contributions and positive feedback from students of color and female students.

Regardless of class size, I use technological and logistical solutions to create a productive learning atmosphere. While my classroom is generally free of laptops and phones to increase students’ focus, I use technology as a tool to encourage participation and spur discussion. For example, for Environmental Policy and Economics, a class of 350 students, I lead a weekly online discussion section with approximately 150 virtual attendees, answering real-time questions. I received feedback that the online participation allowed those students to engage that would not have felt comfortable speaking in class. For project-based learning I incorporate digital tools to track student progress, including platforms such as Coggle and Padlet. These tools have shallow learning curves and enable students to plan, brainstorm, and execute projects individually or in groups. I also ask students to synthesize and present their work using Story Maps, a simplified webpage builder. Several students have told me the work they communicated through these project websites helped them secure internships and jobs.

In sum, my pedagogical strategies have a record of success in empowering and engaging learners by using outcome-driven lesson planning, carefully chosen course content and structure, and deliberate efforts to engage underrepresented students.