

Teaching Statement

My Teaching Goals & Experience

My name is Seth Sykora-Bodie and I am a geographer and applied conservation ecologist who believes that creating and engaging students in an active learning environment is the key first step to preparing the next generation to tackle pressing environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

Between completing my graduate degrees and taking part in [Duke University's Certificate in College Teaching](#) program, I have been fortunate to gain valuable classroom teaching experience across a wide variety of disciplines. At the University of Maryland, I taught two undergraduate sections of Microbiology that were composed of short half hour lectures and hands on laboratory exercises. Here at Duke University, I have been a teaching assistant for Ocean and Coastal Law and Policy, Marine Science and Conservation Leadership, Marine Mammal Biology, Social Impact Assessment, Marine Fisheries Policy, Marine Climate Change, and Conservation Biology.

Regardless of whether I am teaching law, policy, natural or social sciences, every time I enter the classroom, I have four main goals driving what I do. First, I foster a respectful and inclusive atmosphere where students can voice opinions and ideas. Second, I encourage a participatory learning environment that actively engages students in their own learning. Third, I improve my students' ability to organize their thoughts and strengthen their written arguments. Finally, I work to instill in them a sound environmental ethic to make them responsible stewards of the natural world.

My Theory of Learning

Educators are guides that motivate and facilitate student learning. I believe that only through active learning will students be able to engage, critically analyze, and produce knowledge. Similarly, I believe that science is fundamentally about asking questions and weighing evidence to determine the validity of a particular hypothesis. As children we asked whether dolphins sleep and how fast a hummingbird's wings beat because we were young and curious. Central to what we do as educators is to encourage students to be active participants in their own education by showing them how to ask and answer those questions in a structured and rigorous fashion.

How I Communicate and Teach

Two main concepts drive my teaching and style of communication in the classroom. First, I strive to incorporate opportunities for students to actively engage with the material (e.g., conservation ecology, regulatory policy, international environmental agreements) and participate in class. One way that I do this is by often making students responsible for topics or ideas so that they can relate to the material during in-class discussions. For example, when lecturing on wildlife management, I assign each student a species (e.g., killer whales and monk seals) to read about before class so that they have a reference point during discussions about regulatory actions or population dynamics. Other times, I break students up into 'expert' and 'teaching' groups in which the former is responsible for knowing an article and developing a short handout, which they then take and present to their separate 'teaching' groups.

My second belief is that students need to be capable of transferring their knowledge, skills and training out of the classroom to be truly successful—whether in research and academia, in policy and management, in the legal world or elsewhere. I can teach them field skills (digging nests to relocate sea turtle eggs), communication skills (using online tools to build infographics), and mentoring skills (peer-reviewing papers for fellow classmates). But to compliment what students learn in the classroom, I actively encourage experiential learning by helping them to find internships, apply for fellowships and write mini-grant

proposals. Other venues make good classrooms, whether they are local marshes or faraway boardrooms—my goal is to help students bridge those distances, both physically and psychologically.

Teaching Writing

As educators, a prime challenge is teaching students how to structure their thoughts. From years of studying French and Arabic, I know that writing is the best way to keep oneself organized because it forces us to take what we have heard, and both synthesize and re-articulate it. In my classroom, I balance a real desire to focus on improving students' writing with the reality of time constraints and the need to apportion time to other learning activities by assigning multiple, narrowly-focused short writing assignments.

Writing is also about making a claim and defending it. A student must articulate a hypothesis, explain their motivation, ground it in theory or relevant material, and support their claims. The initial struggle is often in developing a central argument and connecting it with the literature. Practice makes perfect, so I use short writing assignments and graduated approaches to move from outlines to paragraphs to papers. Revisions and editing are a key ingredient that many students are not in the habit of doing, and these approaches address that by helping them continuously revisit and critically reevaluate their work.

Grading and Assessment

Rather than discouraging creativity, grades should encourage and motivate students to dive into the material. Grades are a tool for communication and as a consequence I must decide what I want them to communicate to others. Am I mainly trying to motivate my students? Tell prospective employers their likelihood of success? Or indicate to graduate schools whether they should accept a particular student? Since I cannot tailor grading for each individual student, I am clear and consistent about my expectations and I focus on assessment across a variety of categories—writing, engagement in class discussions, presentation of material, and field skills—so that I can assess their performance in a variety of ways.

My Own Personal Growth

Despite having experience teaching both undergraduate, graduate, and law students in eight different courses (Ocean & Coastal Law and Policy, Marine Science & Conservation Leadership, Conservation Biology, Marine Climate Change, etc.), I believe that teaching is an iterative process. In order to refine my teaching practices, I am currently participating in Duke University's Certificate in College Teaching program, which provides additional training for students considering careers in academia and encourages thoughtful reflection on how to be more intentional in our teaching, grading, curriculum development, etc.

To ensure that I effectively communicate, I ask for regular, anonymous feedback, at least once informally mid-semester to allow for course corrections, and also more formally at the end of the semester through course evaluations. Teaching reviews are important for the practical suggestions that they can provide on how to improve the courses I offer. The challenge is asking the correct questions to elicit useful advice so that I am being responsive to my students' needs. One recent realization that I came to as a result of feedback was that I was not providing students with enough time to consider their responses to questions. Now, I make sure to wait, even if the silence is uncomfortable, until students have had time to think.

Final Thoughts

So what do I want my students to gain from having me teaching them about the environment and conservation? I want them to learn more about the topics at hand, I want them to improve their ability to think critically about the material we cover and clearly communicate it to others, I want them to be truly enriched with new ideas, and I want them to enjoy themselves throughout the learning process.