

Perspectives

by Matthew D. Johnson



"Twenty years of schooling and they put you on the day-shift": reflections of a first-year wildlife teacher

First, my apologies to Mr. Dylan for ripping off a couple of his lines. Second, make that 22 years. Last July, with the ink still drying on the "Ph.D." beside my name, I began preparing for my new job: a year of teaching wildlife management at Humboldt State University. The agonizing uncertainty of unemployment was now at least 10 months away, and I immersed myself in the task of getting ready to be on the "other" side of the classroom. I mean really on the other side: my contract stipulated 15 "weighted teaching units." For the fall semester, that equated to 3 sections of a lecture-lab course in ornithology, 2 sections of a lecture-lab habitat ecology course, and a graduate discussion seminar. After taping my schedule to my door, I realized that, counting office hours, lectures, and labs, I was going to have precisely the same number of student-contact hours/week as I had years since birth. Still, I had been amateurishly ruminating over teaching styles and philosophies as a graduate student for the previous 3 years, and the opportunity to take the helm of an entire course (or 3) filled with me a delightful nervous anticipation, an intimidating sense of responsibility, and an eagerness to test my ability to capture the hearts and minds of *my students*. Even those 2 little words quickened my pulse. I was effervescent.

So was my first lecture, which is not to say it was a great lecture. Fortunately, my nerves calmed soon thereafter and I settled into a year of very hard work and, to my satisfaction, great joy. Now that the spring grades have been tabulated and submitted, part of me wishes I could relive it again starting tomorrow (the other part, of course, wishes for a stiff drink). After all, I cannot have another first year. Yet it is during my first year of teaching that I stand uniquely between the profession to which I aspire—teaching—and the primary beneficiary of that profession—students. During my first year of

teaching, I have the maximum benefit of the familiarity of being a full-time student.

Thus, I here offer a few points to consider, not because I believe my thoughts are better than others' nor because I am afraid they will only degrade with time, but because they illustrate my perspective as a first-year teacher, which will never be clearer than it is right now. I have written the points in the first person because I wish to personalize my opinions and wish to write to myself as much as to others.

First, I must teach both science and affection. Wildlife science, like other natural resource sciences, is a blending of science, management, engineering, and art (Leopold 1940). Previous commentators have justly criticized natural resource biologists, educators, and students for lacking scientific rigor (Romesburg 1991), whereas others have criticized with equal justification that we too often lack heart (Orr 1994, Hoots 1999). I must strive for, and teach, both. I must emphasize logic and hypothetico-deductive reasoning by challenging my students to construct predictions, to ask themselves "if...then...." Simultaneously, I must nurture, by demonstrating my own love for all things wild, the wonderfully active appreciation of natural history that draws students to wildlife courses in the first place.

These simultaneous (but not conflicting) demands are perhaps most easily met in the field and during hands-on lab exercises. Educators often talk of "teachable moments," when a student's mind is most receptive to new concepts. Maria Montessori (1912) suggested that students pass through discrete "sensitive periods" when their minds are emotionally and perhaps physiologically most able to learn particular subjects, and she believed students are naturally drawn to subjects when most appropriate. I believe that students enroll in wildlife courses because they are eager to learn basic natural history, and I, as a teacher, can use

their receptivity for natural history as a springboard to teach scientific reasoning and a sense of wonder. For example, while in the field I should in one breath praise the glory of the iridescent feathers of a bluebird; I should draw students to recognize that, in Thoreau's words (1910:484), "The bluebird carries the sky on his back." With the next breaths, I should ask students to consider ecological hypotheses for why European starlings out-compete bluebirds for nest cavities in some areas. I also should ask students to consider evolutionary hypotheses for the maintenance of eastern and western varieties of bluebirds as separate species, and then I should return our discussion to the brilliance of the bird. Infusing science with affection is critical because it establishes an ethical underpinning for conservation. As Rachel Carson's life and words have shown us, "If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow" (Carson 1965:14).

Second, I must help cultivate a sense of place. An "information explosion" is reportedly underway, but what can more truthfully be said is that while much information is gained, much local knowledge, knowledge people have of their own places, is being lost (Lopez 1989). This is an urgent call for conservation educators, for local knowledge helps us establish a connection between ourselves and the land around us—it helps build our sense of place. I believe that fostering a sense of place is necessary for humanity to change its role in the landscape, as Aldo Leopold (1966:240) put it, "from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it." Moreover, learning about one's place stirs students and faculty to form opinions and take stands, to wrestle free of the tendency for academic scientists to mistakenly equate objectivity with neutrality. By thinking critically about managing natural resources in our places and turning our intellectual wanderings to actions, we can redirect academia toward its ultimate objective—to build healthy, resilient, prosperous, and just human communities (Orr 1994).

Third, I must let students teach me. In all my thinking about education and my analyses of resource management, I must not lose the recognition that ultimately my students' behaviors demonstrate how well I do my job. Their responses to my teaching, what they say and what is left unsaid, tell me much about how I can change my teaching to better promote learning in them and in myself. I must recognize that teaching, like leadership, is a balance of directed vision and flexibility (Bybee

1993). I must always welcome the redirection spurred by students' humbling comments. In the end, my success is measured not by how well my students contribute to my discipline but by how well they contribute to theirs. Thus, the question of teaching to the "top" or "bottom" students is irrelevant. "You can teach some of the students all of the time, or all of the students some of the time, but you can't teach all of the students all of the time." I think Abraham Lincoln said that. To my students I offer this: "I'll let you be my teacher if I can be yours." I said that.

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