

## **Summary of evaluations BIO341 2013**

(emneansvarlig: Lawrence Kirkendall)

**BIO341, Current Topics in Biodiversity**, is a 5 credit course (not a full, 10 ECU course!) which meets in the fall semester. It is only open to graduate students (MSc, PhD students).

The course format included one double lecture introducing the course and five shorter presentations by Kirkendall (case studies, supplementary material); seven meetings had at least some discussion. One meeting included a panel discussion/debate on "The New Conservation". For all sessions, the students were asked to have read the required reading ahead of time. The only full, formal lecture was the first day. Given the non-standard format of this seminar-like course, I wanted to know more about how the students felt it had succeeded towards the goal of teaching them about biodiversity, and I used a short evaluation form I had written myself.

The six students who took the course were given 20 min at the end of the last meeting to fill in the evaluation; they were asked (1) about the required readings (five chapters from the book, and supplementary articles), (2) about the overall course format (which is a little lecturing by me, but mainly presentations by the students on topics assigned by me and class discussions of the readings and presentations), and (3) if they had any further comments on the course. *The evaluation is necessarily only about the eight double-hours during which the course met. My expectation is that much of their learning actually comes from doing the semester project.*

**(1) REQUIRED READING. (a) Generally, did you like the book? Why or why not? Strengths and weaknesses of the book?** (book: Gaston, KJ & Spicer, JI (2004), *Biodiversity, an Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. edition)

The students unanimously felt that the book was easy to understand and a good source for the basic facts about biodiversity. In particular, several students pointed out that because of the sentence structure and writing style, the book is easy to understand for students with English as a foreign language. Comments ranged from, "It's actually one of my favorite textbooks because it's clear and to the point...", to "Not the worst book."

**(b) Same questions, for the articles\* which were assigned.**

Feelings about the articles were mixed (students felt some were difficult to understand), but there was a consensus that they were useful and complemented the chapters well, especially when they could be discussed in class. That they sometimes expressed conflicting viewpoints (about values, for example) was mentioned by several students as especially interesting. One student pointed out that some articles were "rather demanding", and suggested that it could be an idea to hand out a help sheet with difficult concepts and vocabulary; I think this is a good idea and will try to implement it next year.

\*These ranged from short popular science articles to advanced review articles, so they were quite heterogeneous in level of difficulty. There was at least one article for six of the eight meetings.

**(2) COURSE FORMAT. This course is a mixture of lectures, student presentations, and discussion. Do you feel that you learned well, from this mixture? Do you think the discussion format was useful to you? Would you have preferred another course format?**

All students liked the format, and liked the discussions. Those mentioning them also thought the presentations were good, both for learning more about specific examples and for presenting something about Nepal in the context of the specific topic. (I often asked specifically that students relate their assigned topic to Nepal.) With regard to the discussions, their comments suggest that students appreciated the opportunity to actively discuss topics especially where they were unsure or where there was controversy. A few quotes:

- "Det at faget ble undervist på forskjellige måter gjorde det lett å følge med. Diskusjonene var lærerike og fikk deg til å virkelig tenke over det du leste."
- "This course actually made me feel like a masters student. We were able to actually think and discuss, which is surprisingly not super common. The laid back feel also allows for thoughts to easily flow. Even if we weren't always on topic, I feel I learned a lot, even if it sometimes was just fun facts or vocabulary. Very useful. I prefer this format to most if not all of my courses."
- "...The mixture was good, it provided less predictability and more activity, both being good. Less homogeneous work stimulates learning, I think."
- "The mixture is a perfect combination... The course offered a very good background to investigate more deeply some aspects related to biodiversity and conservation biology. Also a good ground for knowledge testing."
- "I like the discussion, it makes it easier to reflect, think and digest the content. Maybe have a bit more time (since we did go overtime a few times). [Instructor's note: students were free to leave, but several or even all stayed up to an hour overtime on a few occasions.]

**3. Do you have any other comments on the course?**

(selected comments)

- "Likte fag utrolig godt. Veldig lærerikt."
- "I am going to miss our little biodiversity group. Thanks for helping me ameliorate the paucity/dearth of knowledge I had prior to this course. Luckily everyone's were not homogenized and there wasn't too much strawmanning (totally a verb) going on in the discussions."
- "Like how you based the seminars on student participation. Best wishes! (and thanks for stimulating talks, mini-lectures and everything inbetween.)
- "Maybe more hours to avoid rushing through many different topics. (Not possible because of the 5 credits?)

## MY COMMENTS

I am used to having at least twice as many students, and at the first meeting (which only four students could attend) this felt a bit awkward. But I adjusted and by the end really loved it. It didn't take long before students were unselfconsciously participating thoughtfully in all the discussions.

Even with the increased flexibility afforded by a course meeting only eight times, it was impossible to avoid all conflicts with other courses, and I think that there were only two or three class meetings which were attended by all six students.

I find it interesting and encouraging that once again students are complaining that a course is too short—that they want a longer course, to learn more! I got the same comments last year, and I repeat what I wrote then:

“A nice thing for a teacher to hear! I developed the course in response to an expressed need for smaller courses which graduate students could cobble together. For awhile, we had 5 credit courses in Biodiversity, Population Genetics, Phylogeography, Biogeography, Alpine Ecology, and Winter Ecology, as offerings in non-marine ecology and evolutionary biology. Of these, only Biodiversity remains (I understand that that Alpine Ecology and Winter Ecology are being discontinued now that Torstein is retiring). The Biodiversity course could be developed into a larger course (perhaps combined with topics from conservation biology or with more quantitative approaches, perhaps with a field component), depending on the willingness of other faculty to collaborate and on the needs of the institute (5- vs 10-credit course offerings).”

--Lawrence Kirkendall, 6 Dec. 2013