

Evaluation of BIO341 Current Topics in Biodiversity, Fall 2014

About the course

The biodiversity course is open to MSc and PhD students, and is held in English.

Lawrence Kirkendall is responsible for the course, which meets 8 times during the semester (see below); this year, there was also a field trip to the Bergen Aquarium. The course is based on student participation, so attendance is mandatory. There is little formal lecturing; normally, the course includes required student presentations, but since there were only four students this year, the requirement for a presentation was met by a panel discussion during one session. Students are expected to read the assigned materials in advanced and come prepared to discuss them. **Required readings** included a short textbook (Gaston and Spicer 2003, *Biodiversity: An Introduction*) and selected articles.

There were only four students in the course this fall: 2 Norwegians, one from Brazil (PhD student), and one from Sudan.

Course requirements

There is no final exam in this course. Instead, students do a term project on a subject of their own choosing, in addition to the presentation requirement mentioned above. The projects can be presented in any Scandinavian language, English, or Spanish. I encourage students to choose presentation forms other than an essay, and to write for any chosen readership, but they are required to specify the intended audience and projects are graded on how well they achieve this objective. In past years, the best nontraditional projects have included three childrens books, websites, posters, newspaper articles (later published), popular science articles (later published), and scientific research articles (later published). This year I received projects in the form of an essay (publishable quality), a report on school classroom question and answer session (on concepts of nature and biodiversity), an article intended for *Naturen*, and a newspaper article (not publishable).

Following up on previous evaluations

Recent evaluations have been very positive with few concrete complaints, so there have been no substantive changes this year specifically in response to earlier evaluations.

Student Evaluation of BIO341 2014

I hand out simple evaluation forms during the final session, so all students write evaluations. Here is the text from this year's form, to which I have appended summaries of the responses from the students.

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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 included one double lecture introducing the course and six meetings with general discussions plus shorter presentations by me (case studies, supplementary material). One meeting was a panel discussion/debate on “The New Conservation”. We also had a field trip to the Bergen Aquarium which included a question and answer session with the marine biologist and the director of the aquarium.

(questions continue on the back side!)

(1) REQUIRED READING. (a) Generally, did you like the book? Why or why not? Strengths and weaknesses of the book?

1. Yes, “easy to read...good overview...” but a bit out of date
2. No, boring, not well written
3. Generally ok, a bit outdated, “a bit boring—some colors would have been nice!”
4. Yes, good overview of all aspects of biodiversity, “interesting and easy to read, very current examples even for a book 10 years old”

Lawrence Kirkendall: It has been difficult to find a book for a 5 credit course. I like this one because it is well under 200 pages and a good mixture of generalizations, theory, and examples. I do supplement the topics with short presentations and newer articles or book chapters, but each year I check for other possible texts and consider scrapping the book and just using articles. Students are presented in the same order, for each question below.

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

1. informative, current, “good spread of themes and complexity”
2. “The articles were amazing. The discussion were inspiring. That was a learning experience I never had before.”
3. good, good overview, different perspectives, “Sometimes too much to read the both book and articles. Some articles too detailed to be relevant.”
4. “very interesting, covering different points of view...which stimulated discussion and change of opinion”

Lawrence Kirkendall: Popular articles, review papers, research papers. I tried not to assign too many pages per week (re student 3) but sometimes might have been a bit much.

(2) COURSE FORMAT. This course was a mixture of one lecture and several shorter presentations by me, general discussion, a video, and

the panel discussion on the New Conservation. 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 (such as more formal lecturing)?

1. "Very useful. Never seemed to run out of questions to ask."
2. "The format was quite unique and interesting. We learned a lot from the discussions and teaching materials."
3. "I think this was a really good mixture! It's easy to focus when you make the lecture like a conversation. The more interaction between the teacher and students the better."
4. "I like the way the course was offered. It was very interesting as student come prepared for discussion or prepared to ask questions..."
[can't read the last two words!]

Lawrence Kirkendall: Maybe it was the small class size, but this year's group was extremely participative, and I had no problem at all with getting them to answer questions I posed while lecturing or getting them to discuss questions they or I raised. Doing a course this way is a bit scary, because you never know quite what to expect, but it is very rewarding when it works well.

(3) Did the course fulfill your expectations based on the Learning Outcomes? *[note: I handed out the Learning Outcomes.]*

1. "I expected to learn a lot about biodiversity and related themes, and I felt I did."
2. "Indeed, and it was little better because I didn't expect all the freedom to raise subjects during the lecture."
3. "Yes, very much so."
4. "Yes, it did. I was expecting some more tradition, like only presentation, but I became very surprised with the way everything was approaching."

(4) Any other comments on the course?

1. (blank)
2. "maybe having student presentations will be a good idea? maybe about their own development in their projects; I don't even know what other students are working on."
3. "Your enthusiasm and eager gesticulation is engaging!"
4. (blank)

Lawrence Kirkendall: The one weakness I see with the course is that which was pointed out by student 2. I will consider doing something like this, or having a short seminar day with student presentations after they have finished them.