

SECTION THREE

Example One – Conducting a habitat survey of campus

This practical introduced students to conducting phase 1 habitat surveys, a skill required for a career in ecological consultancy. Students were given the theoretical background, a map of campus, a reference book and asked to complete their own survey with my assistance.

Like many postgraduate teaching assistants, I often worry about the questions students may ask on a topic which I am less familiar with (Morss, 2005). This was particularly the case with this module as I have never worked as an ecological consultant. Consequently, I took time to familiarise myself with the literature and I set-out on the practical feeling much more confident. This proved essential as my students greatly ranged in their abilities; whilst some students struggled with the fundamentals of map reading, others excelled at identifying British wildlife. This required me to adapt both my content and delivery to each student depending on their knowledge. To achieve this, I adopted a constructivist approach (Biggs, 2003), checking each students' understanding to ensure that they had a solid basis for any new knowledge gained in the practical. Based on this information I then used probing questions to encourage a 'higher level of understanding' (Ramsden, 1992) by connecting our field observations to information from lectures and other modules. For example, when classifying woodland and scrub (required for this practical), I brought the students attention to buddleia which is a valuable resource to pollinators, yet classified as an invasive species (covered in the biodiversity and conservation model). This allowed us to discuss the importance of this feature on wider biodiversity and the need to record this as a 'target note' which is used in Phase 1 surveys to record additional information about a point of interest. Sometimes I worry that I make these types of connections too quickly or too obvious to the students, making them passive in their own learning. Hopefully with more experience I will develop my ability to push students without revealing the answer and understand the most appropriate time to do so.

This practical was well designed, with the tasks 'constructively aligned' to the learning objectives (Biggs, 2003). Consequently, the students were focused and engaged with the work, knowing exactly what was required from them. This made my role as a demonstrator more relaxed as I could move from a didactic "this feature shows x" to a more facilitative role, guiding the students in their own learning. Throughout the practical I tried to maintain a good rapport with the students which I hoped would encourage them to approach me with any questions or feedback that they had. Further conversations with some students revealed their active participation in ecological societies including the 'bee society', the study species of my PhD. This provided the opportunity for me to offer suggestions for obtaining postgraduate research opportunities which the students appreciated and I really enjoyed.

474 words

Literature cited:

Biggs, J (2003) Teaching for Quality Learning at University. Open University Press/SRHE: Maidenhead.

Morss, K and Murray, R (2005) Teaching at university: a guide for postgraduates and researchers. Sage: London.

Ramsden, P (1992) Learning to teach in Higher Education. Routledge: London.